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Mr Grant Mottram
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Mottram

Special measures monitoring inspection of Abbey Woods Academy

Following my visit to your school on 15 and 16 March 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in May 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Oxfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Clive Dunn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2015

- Urgently ensure that safeguarding policies and procedures meet statutory requirements for keeping pupils safe by:
 - collating and maintaining clearance details for all members of staff on a single central record
 - addressing the difficulties around the safety of the site
 - maintaining vigilance to make sure that those areas which are not safe for pupils are not accessible to them.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good in order to accelerate pupils' progress by ensuring that:
 - teachers' assessment of pupils' current achievement is accurate from the point of entry to the academy so that they provide work which will stretch all groups of pupils, including the most able
 - teachers develop more skilful use of questioning during lessons so that they can move pupils on or support them further
 - all staff develop high expectations and aspirations for all pupils and increase the opportunities for deepening their understanding across all the subjects studied
 - disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified by all teachers, and supported and stretched with work at appropriate levels of challenge, including in the early years
 - work set to develop the technical understanding of English spelling, punctuation and grammar enables pupils to attain higher standards in writing, in all year groups
 - all pupils are motivated to work hard and to take pride in the presentation in their workbooks
 - the behaviour of pupils is managed effectively and consistently so that it does not disrupt their learning and that of others.
- Improve the impact of leaders at all levels, the trust and governors by ensuring that:
 - the trust board and governors develop systems to provide them with an accurate view of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and hold leaders to account for bringing about improvement
 - finances and resources to support disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are allocated and monitored effectively

- the recently forged partnership between the interim headteacher, trust primary lead, and trust learning and teaching coach is further strengthened to accelerate pupils' progress
- subject leaders have appropriate training to improve the quality of teaching in their areas and are held accountable for pupils' progress in their subject.
- Improve outcomes for children in the early years by:
 - ensuring the accuracy of teachers' assessments so that appropriate activities are planned for all children
 - ensuring that activities in all lessons stretch pupils of all abilities including the most able and children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

An external review of governance should be undertaken to assess how this aspect of the work of the school can be improved.

An external review of the pupil premium should be undertaken to assess how this aspect of the work of the school can be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 15 March 2017 to 16 March 2017

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other school leaders, staff and pupils. He spoke informally with parents at the start of the school day. Her Majesty's Inspector also met with the chief executive officer and regional director from the academy trust, and governors that form the rapid improvement board. He visited all classes to observe lessons, review pupils' work and discuss their learning with them. All of these visits were carried out jointly with the headteacher and/or deputy headteacher. The inspector also observed outdoor lunchtime arrangements.

Context

As part of previously planned changes, the former executive headteacher's involvement with the school has ended. The school is now under the stewardship of the headteacher. The vice-chair of governors has assumed the role of chair. The previous chair continues to have direct and close involvement with the school in her role as regional director for the trust. The transition arrangements between the interim special educational needs coordinator and the deputy headteacher, taking over this role, have finished.

In addition, one teacher has left since the previous monitoring visit. Two small classes in Year 4 have been combined to be taught by one teacher. Similarly, leaders have introduced flexible arrangements with two smaller classes in Year 1, which are also combined for some teaching. The early years leader from another school in the trust is no longer providing support. The headteacher is currently overseeing the leadership and management of the early years.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders at all levels responded decisively and effectively to the findings of the previous monitoring visit. They avoided dwelling on their obvious disappointment, instead moving the school forward with renewed purpose and determination. Together, the trust, governors, leaders and staff have accelerated the pace of improvement markedly. Staff commented how, instead of looking back and thinking about what has improved, discussions are now routinely about, 'what's next?'. Staff remain positive and buoyed up by the recent pace of improvement. They are confident in the leadership of the headteacher and other senior leaders.

There is a far greater clarity about what needs to be achieved. This is evident in

many different ways. Leaders have pulled together their various plans for improvement to create a common sense of purpose. They have taken care to ensure that these plans reflect the necessary urgency, but also lead to improvements that are secure and sustainable.

There are promising signs of the strengthening capacity of leadership at different levels. The benefits of recent support from other schools have been maximised by focusing on improving both teaching and leadership simultaneously. Subject leaders have benefited from working alongside trained coaches and mentors from two teaching schools. The role of subject leaders in securing and sustaining improvements to the quality of teaching has increased markedly. Support plans for individual teachers are precise and regularly reviewed. School leaders recognise the importance of sustaining this impetus now that external support has significantly reduced.

Governance is now more effective. The rapid improvement board of governors has balanced determination with care and sensitivity to strengthen its role in challenging school leaders. Governors have ensured that increasing rigour and challenge are offset by suitable support to sustain constructive and productive relationships. While pleased to see the accelerating pace of improvement, governors are realistic about the challenges that remain. At all levels, leaders' increasingly careful checks on the difference made by their actions keep them realistic and grounded about what they have and have not achieved. This enables them to make important adjustments to sustain improvements.

The improving quality of education is undoubtedly benefiting disadvantaged pupils. Diminishing differences between the outcomes of all Abbey Woods' pupils compared with those of other pupils nationally is at the centre of leaders' drive for improvement. However, the specific focus on the impact of spending on disadvantaged pupils is still not as sharp as it should be. There is not a clear picture of how much current strategies are hoped to diminish differences for disadvantaged pupils, and whether leaders are on track to achieve this. A statement about leaders' spending decisions and the differences these are intended to make is now available on the school's website, but it has some important omissions. For example, it does not identify the particular barriers to better outcomes that some disadvantaged pupils may have. Also, it compares the performance of disadvantaged pupils with that others in school rather than that of other pupils nationally.

The deputy headteacher has now fully assumed the role of special educational needs coordinator. She has carried out the planned evaluation of the impact of additional help sessions on accelerating pupils' progress. In some cases, these have significantly accelerated the progress of those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in the particular areas targeted.

She has also worked with staff to adapt or change the support where the difference has been less marked. However, the quality of teaching for those who have special

educational needs and/or disabilities remains variable, both in these sessions and in lessons. Teaching does not meet the particular needs of these pupils consistently well enough to ensure that they make as much progress as they could.

There is clear evidence that the quality of the early years provision is improving steadily. Leaders and staff act on advice they receive in a timelier manner than they did previously. They have now checked thoroughly that all safeguarding and welfare requirements are met. Adults' use of what they know about children's capabilities to plan challenging activities has improved. The quality of activities, particularly inside, has strengthened, with clearer purpose and challenge. However, this remains variable, particularly outside, where a few children still spend too much time wandering aimlessly, or flitting from activity to activity.

The suitability of new staff continues to be checked rigorously. Overseen closely by governors, the leaders and staff have strengthened systems further to ensure that these procedures are tight and well maintained. Governors and the trust have begun regular checks so they can be confident that the single central register always meets requirements. Leaders have reviewed induction procedures to make sure that all staff receive the appropriate level of safeguarding training in a timely manner. Staff are knowledgeable about their responsibilities and use the school's clear and effective systems if they have any worries. Records of these concerns are systematic and well organised. They indicate that staff are alert and take necessary steps to promote pupils' safety and well-being. Leaders have enhanced site security further on this shared site. Staff are deployed strategically at breaktimes to ensure the safety of pupils crossing areas accessed by other site users.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders and teachers have raised academic expectations substantially since the previous monitoring visit. Both pupils and parents have noticed this and commented on how hard pupils are now expected to work. Pitching the general level of teaching and learning higher has particularly strengthened the recent progress of middle-ability and most-able pupils. Leaders recognise that, increasingly, this alone will not be enough to ensure that the most able pupils fulfil their potential once previous deficits have been overcome.

Teachers' questioning is increasingly effective, for example checking carefully how well pupils understand a concept, or encouraging them to explain their thinking. The teaching of mathematics is improving. Adults continue to use a range of visual images and practical apparatus to help pupils understand key concepts. Work in pupils' books shows that their learning progresses more systematically through different concepts. More often than in the past, the level of difficulty builds in a timely fashion as their understanding develops. Pupils are gaining in confidence and are able to recall an increasing range of prior learning.

Although improving, the quality of teaching remains variable. Leaders have an accurate view of where further improvement is still needed and continue to focus

their actions accordingly. Checks by experienced leaders and teachers from other schools have confirmed that, on the whole, teachers assess pupils' capabilities accurately. However, teachers do not use this information well enough to fully meet the needs of pupils with different starting points. At times, those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported in lessons, for example by making sound mats readily available to support phonetically plausible spelling, reinforced by targeted, individual guidance from the teacher. However, at other times, teachers do not ensure that lower ability pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities really understand what they are learning. This means that they struggle to remember what they have learned from previous activities, slowing their progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils work hard. They are typically more industrious in lessons than they were previously and their progress is improving as a result. They are now taking real care over the quality of their work. Pupils' presentation has improved and they are understandably proud of the results. Pupils are responsive to adults' instructions, and concentrate and engage well in lessons. For a number of them, writing is still not an activity they enjoy, but they work hard at it, nonetheless.

In an effort to sustain and build on their previous success in improving pupils' attitudes and behaviour, leaders identified that issues at lunchtime meant that some pupils were not ready to learn at the start of the afternoon. A new behaviour and consequence system has been well received by pupils who say that it is fair and applied consistently in lessons and at breaktimes. Leaders report that this is enabling a calmer and more purposeful start to afternoon sessions.

Although not all parents have complete confidence in the success of the school in tackling bullying, overall, pupils and parents report that it is much improved. Pupils say that they feel safe and well listened to by adults in school. Their knowledge and depth of understanding of how to keep themselves safe online are variable.

Current attendance rates are improving. Leaders are correct in continuing to prioritise their drive to ensure that pupils attend regularly. Although fewer pupils now are frequently absent, current attendance figures remain lower than previous national averages overall.

Outcomes for pupils

Standards across the school are undoubtedly rising. Leaders and teachers are much more aware of the importance of checking whether pupils are doing well enough by comparing where they are now with their starting points. Work in pupils' books, together with in-school assessment information, provide convincing evidence of pupils' accelerating progress. That said, while overall outcomes are improving, too much variability between classes and different groups of pupils remains. In some classes, most-able pupils are encouraged and enabled to produce work of a higher standard than their peers. However, too many have still not sustained better progress for long enough to be reaching standards in their work of which their starting points suggest they are capable.

From early years and onwards, teachers provide pupils with frequent opportunities to develop their writing skills, supporting their improving progress. The strong emphasis placed by staff on accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation is paying off. Further staff training in effective phonics teaching means that current Year 1 pupils are much closer to where they should be in comparison with pupils in the past. Pupils try hard to use increasingly ambitious vocabulary and make good attempts at spelling when unsure. However, in some classes, pupils do not write enough in each task to develop the full range of writing skills they need.

Better progress means that different groups of pupils are starting to catch up with other pupils nationally. However, for many, there is still a considerable amount of lost ground to make up. For older year groups in particular, there is still a long way to go to match the standards of other pupils nationally. That said, these pupils are currently making some of the strongest progress in the school. Differences in their attainment are due to a legacy of significant underachievement in the past. Their current progress, positive attitudes to learning and strong work ethic are crucial factors in readying them for their secondary education.

External support

Action taken by the trust since the previous monitoring visit has been decisive, appropriate and well judged. The trust has successfully balanced more rigorous challenge with effective support to ensure that the school keeps moving forward, now with renewed vigour. In this way, the trust has helped to focus the attention of school leaders sharply on the key priorities that are making the biggest differences, such as improving the quality of teaching. In his first week, the new chief executive officer made visiting the school to check on the progress being made one of his top priorities. Intensive work with other schools within and beyond the trust, including teaching schools, has benefited and contributed well to improvements in both leadership and teaching.

The local authority continues to provide useful feedback and set pertinent next steps for the improvement of the early years. The adviser checks these points systematically at subsequent visits, with evident improvements to the environment,

the quality of learning through play and taught sessions. Support from the local authority inclusion team has led to leaders developing their analysis of how well vulnerable groups of pupils are doing, although this is still work in progress.