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Dr Jo Trevenna
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Dear Dr Trevenna

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sir Herbert Leon Academy

Following my visit with Gerard Strong, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 May 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in October 2016.

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.

The trust's statement of action and the school's action plans are fit for purpose.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Diana Choulerton
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in October 2016

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - securing effective leadership at all levels across the school
 - ensuring that all leaders have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and use this to promote improvements with sufficient urgency
 - ensuring that there is a clear and consistently shared view about what effective teaching looks like across the curriculum
 - ensuring that leaders track robustly and review the work they do to check that their actions have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes
 - rapidly improve the reliability of assessment information, so that leaders and governors have a clear understanding of the progress of different groups of pupils across the school and in different year groups.
- Urgently improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - ensuring that an effective behaviour policy is consistently applied across the school, so that low-level disruption is eradicated
 - providing teachers with effective support in managing behaviour
 - ensuring that all teachers have high expectations of pupils' behaviour
 - ensuring that staff actively, consistently and effectively promote equality, tolerance and respect
 - improving the attendance of all pupils, including significantly reducing the proportion of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities that are frequently absent.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that teachers consistently:
 - have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - plan challenging lessons that enable all pupils to make good progress from their particular starting points, especially the most able
 - plan challenging lessons that enable all pupils to make good progress from their particular starting points, especially the most able
 - use assessment information carefully to target teaching activities and interventions more sharply to reduce gaps in pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Ensure that the recent rapid improvements to the sixth form are sustained, so that all students make good progress from their starting points and are well prepared for their next steps.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 May 2017

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school at work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior leaders and middle leaders, staff and groups of pupils. A meeting was also held with the chair and one other member of the management board. Inspectors observed learning in lessons, most jointly with the senior leaders. In addition, inspectors looked at samples of pupils' work from a range of subjects including English and mathematics.

Context

Since the last inspection, there have been significant changes in the senior leadership team. One vice-principal left the school at the end of the autumn term and an assistant principal left at the end of the spring term. Another assistant principal moved in to a lead practitioner role. A new assistant principal joined the school in January. Two new associate assistant principal posts have been created. One associate assistant principal joined the school in January and the head of English has taken up the other of these posts, also in January. New, non-teaching, head of year posts have also been created and filled. Three teachers have resigned and will leave this summer. A house system is now in place. A dedicated area has been set up called The Zone. This provides support for pupils needing behavioural and/or emotional support.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The management board and principal have moved quickly to establish a senior leadership team with the capacity needed to drive rapid improvement. The new team has wasted no time getting to grips with key areas which needed attention. Rightly, tackling poor behaviour and supporting teachers to manage behaviour better in class have been high priorities. A sharpened behaviour policy and better support arrangements for vulnerable pupils and those who find it difficult to behave well are now in place and starting to make a difference. Leaders have set up a rigorous approach to checking the accuracy of the information they collect about pupils' achievement. As a result, leaders now have access to the increasingly precise information needed to understand the extent to which achievement is improving for each group of pupils in each subject. The software now used to collect the information makes it easier for middle leaders to keep track of achievement in the subjects they are responsible for. However, the way senior leaders pull this information together is not yet sharp enough. The summary reports that leaders produce about achievement do not provide a clear enough picture of pupils' achievement over time or the extent to which it is improving.

Leaders have responded well to the helpful recommendations arising from the external review of pupil premium carried out in January. Work is underway to

sharpen the focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils. Regular staff briefings and a plan of where the disadvantaged pupils sit in each class are helping heighten teachers' awareness. Leaders' focus on these pupils is also being sharpened. Leaders are now required to comment on the experience of disadvantaged pupils when recording their observations of teaching. In response to a recommendation from the external review, leaders have undertaken a helpful analysis of the effectiveness of The Zone. This shows which pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, have attended The Zone, the reason for attending and the effectiveness of the support provided. As a result, leaders have a clear understanding of the early success of The Zone and a clear starting point for evaluating its effectiveness going forward. Leaders recognise that this is just the start. However, they are much better placed than previously for driving improvements for disadvantaged pupils. Similarly, the leader responsible for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SENCo) is working to raise teachers' awareness of these pupils' needs. Staff receive regular briefings about the needs of individual pupils, along with strategies staff can use to support them. The SENCo's regular visits to lessons, along with surveys of staff and pupils views, help her check that provision for these pupils is improving.

The management board is providing increasingly helpful challenge and support to leaders. The chair of the board, who is the trust's regional director, meets weekly with the principal, keeping a close eye on developments and providing helpful guidance. Middle leaders now present directly to the board. This enables board members to deepen the extent of their challenge and leaders' accountability. Board members are clear that they cannot hold leaders fully to account unless they have accurate information about all aspects of the school's performance. Rightly, the board is challenging leaders to provide the incisive information about the effectiveness of work to improve the school. The trust's governor services team has recently carried out a review of governance. This has not revealed much that leaders did not already know. The report of the review mainly confirms the strengths in governance reported at the last inspection. However, it does helpfully recommend that the board develops an improvement plan for its work that aligns with the whole-school improvement plan. It is too soon to evaluate the impact this recommendation will have.

The school's action plan has proved useful. It has helped leaders to keep a check on the large number of actions needed to set up more effective leadership and management approaches. Leaders recognise that the plan is reaching the end of its useful life. Sensibly, leaders are starting to develop a longer-term plan against which the management board can hold them clearly to account for the impact of their work over the next year. Mostly, there is now a clear starting point against which leaders can evaluate the impact of their work at key points in the future. However, leaders do not have a sharp understanding of their starting point for improving the quality of teaching. Leaders have stepped up their checks on the quality of teaching. Disappointingly, the information leaders collect about the quality of teaching and the way they analyse it does not give them an accurate enough

view. Leaders recognise that this needs attention urgently.

Leaders have adjusted the approach to staff training to cater better for teachers' different development needs. All staff have weekly sessions on improving practice. Teachers have increased opportunities to learn from one another. Teachers needing the most support to improve receive an intensive programme of support. Leaders have shortened this programme to sharpen the focus on rapid improvement. However, the success of these approaches is variable. Teachers are starting to become more skilled in managing pupils' behaviour in class. The support programme is showing some signs of having a positive effect. However, these approaches have not had a consistently high impact on the quality of teaching or pupils' progress. Although there are pockets of effective teaching, there is not a strong pool of good practice in the school that leaders can draw from to show their expectations. Opportunities for teachers to learn from effective practice in other schools have been quite limited.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is starting to improve. Teachers have typically embraced the school commitment to using the approach of 'hot' and 'cold' tasks. At the start of a lesson or series of lessons, pupils undertake a 'cold' task. This helps teachers understand what pupils know already so they can plan and teach accordingly. Pupils say they find these helpful. It has taken the fear away of 'getting it wrong' and is helping them settle to work. A 'hot' task at the end of a topic helps teachers and pupils see how much they have learned. Teachers are also giving pupils time in lessons to reflect on and improve their work, in line with school policy. This is starting to make a difference. However, the extent to which this is helping pupils make progress remains very variable.

The impact of leaders' work to ensure that pupils of varying abilities receive work of suitable challenge is at an early stage. Leaders have put together helpful grids which indicate the level of skill pupils should develop in each key aspect of each subject as they progress through the school. Pupils' individual targets show the level they should be working at by key points in time. This is helping to ensure that assessment of pupils' achievement at the end of a piece of learning is more accurate. However, typically, teachers are not making good enough use of this information or that which they get from 'cold' tasks. Pupils receive the same depth of challenge regardless of their ability or previous learning. For example, in Year 7 mathematics lessons able pupils were undertaking work on coordinates that contained less challenge than they would typically have experienced in Year 6 in primary school. Where teaching is particularly weak, teachers are not clear about what they want pupils to learn. The activities set are not designed well enough to promote reasonable progress. Leaders recognise the need to equip teachers with the information and skill needed to teach lessons with consistently suitable content and levels of challenge.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour is improving. A sharper behaviour policy coupled with improved support and staff training are starting to make a difference. Younger pupils are clear that behaviour is better than it was. One commented, 'in September it was horrible' but went on to say that it was better than that now. Pupils said adults now deal better with incidents of bullying. School logs show that incidents of bullying have declined. Where teachers are applying the behaviour policy, it is working well. Pupils are clear about the procedures and the consequences of breaching the rules. Now, teachers are required to record the first occasion in a lesson when they remind a pupil about their behaviour. This is helping leaders to see patterns of low-level disruption and intervene more quickly when needed. However, teachers are not consistently applying the policy or recording incidents. Older pupils said disruption in class is still very common. They find cover lessons are particularly frustrating. Pupils reported that some see these lessons as an opportunity to play up and the uninspiring work contributes to poor behaviour.

Increasingly, pupils who find it difficult to cope in lessons benefit from the nurturing environment of The Zone. Pupils value this support and it is helping them cope better when they return to mainstream lessons. Leaders' analysis shows that most pupils' behaviour improved notably because of this support. Incidents of both internal and external exclusion have reduced considerably. Attendance is also improving. Improved tracking of pupils' attendance and increased communication between the SENCo and pastoral leaders are helping to ensure that poor attendance is picked up and tackled more quickly than was previously the case.

Pupils are positive about the introduction of the house system. They said it is helping them feel like members of a community. Pupils also value the increased opportunities to take part in competitions that the house system provides.

Leaders have introduced a new programme to teach pupils about respect and equality. However, the impact on pupils' understanding and the levels of respect they show each other and adults are variable. Pupils who spoke to an inspector had mixed views about whether teachers promoted a clear message about these issues.

Outcomes for pupils

Year 11 pupils value the intensive support they have had in preparation for their GCSE examinations. This is leading to notable progress in some subjects. However, as a result of a legacy of underachievement and continued weaknesses in current teaching, the proportion of Year 11 pupils working at their target grade is low; this is particularly the case in English, mathematics and science. Leaders' reports on pupils' achievement in other year groups do not show whether pupils are making better progress than they were at the time of the last inspection. The quality of teaching and work seen in books indicates that pupils' progress remains variable and is often low.

External support

Leaders have drawn on some helpful, although somewhat limited, ranges of external support. Support from a local teaching school has helped leaders to improve their approach to collecting and checking the accuracy of assessment information. The leader responsible for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities has benefited from support from a trust consultant. This has focused on improving identification of pupils' special educational needs. The humanities team visit to the other local secondary school belonging to the trust has helped the team gain a clearer understanding of new examination requirements. Trust subject advisers are supporting the English, mathematics and science faculties. However, the impact of this work is not yet clear. Leaders and the trust recognise the need to increase the level of external support. The trust has secured funding to bring in support from a local teaching school. The trust's newly appointed teaching and learning adviser is starting to support leaders in their development of teaching and learning.