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15 June 2017

Jenny Veal  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Veal

### **Serious weakness first monitoring inspection of The Taunton Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 7 June 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in January 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, I held meetings with you as headteacher and with members of the senior leadership team; the chair of the local advisory board and two other governors; the chief executive officer of the Richard Huish Trust; the special educational needs coordinator; the head of English, the head of mathematics; the literacy coordinator; the attendance officer and two groups of pupils. The revised trust statement of action, which is incorporated in the school action plan, was evaluated. I accompanied you on a tour of the school where short visits were made to lessons. I also reviewed the school's single central register, which records checks on the employment of staff.

### **Context**

Since the inspection of January 2017, four new staff have begun work, including a data manager, a year leader and two teaching assistants. Three teachers, five teaching assistants and six support staff have left. Support staffing has been restructured. Since January 2017, 34 new pupils have joined the school. The school has now been removed from the financial 'at risk' register by the Education Funding Agency.

## **The quality of leadership and management at the school**

School leaders have maintained their emphasis on developing the systems needed to run an effective school. They have been tenacious in addressing the areas for improvement. They are determined that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment will improve and that pupils will therefore have higher aspirations. There are early indications that this ambition is beginning to have an effect. Nevertheless, significant financial and staffing challenges have slowed the impact of leaders' work.

A major focus of the work has been on identifying and sharing the pockets of good practice which exist within the school. An effective system has been established, where heads of faculties work together to observe lessons, so that less experienced leaders learn from those who are more established. Teachers in both the English and mathematics departments plan lessons together and this has helped to improve the quality of teaching and accelerate the rate of pupil progress in these subjects. Performance management has been used effectively to identify stronger teaching across the school, and the stronger teachers are used to model good practice and lead staff meetings.

The school has provided professional development for all staff, especially on the use of data and strategies to accelerate progress in learning. In this they have been helped by the local teaching schools who have also moderated work with the English and mathematics departments to ensure accuracy of judgements. The remodelling of the English curriculum, which began before the previous inspection, is now complete. This is having a positive impact on the progress of pupils and has meant that there are higher expectations of what pupils of all abilities can achieve. Progress in mathematics has improved but not at the same rate as in English. This is partly accounted for by the fact that currently a high proportion of the department are not specialist mathematicians. The school is addressing this issue for September.

You and your senior team have raised the expectations for the performance of disadvantaged pupils and have provided considerable additional support, especially in Year 11. Interventions such as the pupil premium evening schools have been well attended and, lower down the school, far more support is given through strategies such as reducing class sizes and withdrawing small groups. Early indications are that this is beginning to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils, especially in English, but more data is needed before this can be confirmed.

You and the senior team are very aware that the quality of teaching remains inconsistent. The match of work to pupils' abilities is not always sufficiently close, especially for pupils who have special educational needs. However, the level of challenge set for higher-ability pupils has increased and they are now making better progress. Pupils in Year 10 confirmed that teachers are demanding more of them. The extent to which teachers insist on accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar in written work varies. In some subjects, notably English, matters of spelling, punctuation and grammar are regularly commented on in feedback and followed up

if pupils do not respond. However, in other subjects, teachers do not sufficiently insist on accuracy. They do not consistently follow up when pupils' responses are non-existent or only cursory.

The school has continued to stress the importance of regular attendance and of reducing persistent absence. It has rewritten the attendance policy and established much more secure systems for recording absence. These changes have resulted in a slow improvement but attendance remains stubbornly low. The newly recruited attendance officer, supported by the home school liaison officer, has been assiduous in following up pupils, speaking to parents and making home visits. They are working effectively with outside agencies. The school has issued penalty notices and taken court action against persistent absentees. The school is not complacent and is determined that attendance will improve.

Instances of poor behaviour have been reduced and stronger systems now allow the school to track the types of poor behaviour and to address them at a whole-school level. Nevertheless, low-level disruption within some lessons remains a cause for concern. The pupils recognise that behaviour systems have now been strengthened and appreciate this. However, they also realise that teachers do not all apply the systems consistently and that some teachers act much more decisively and quickly than others. The pupils appreciate the rewards system which is used. Although leaders monitor the rewards and sanctions carefully, pupils consider that rewards are sometimes given too freely to pupils. The rate of exclusion has also reduced, although this still remains too high. Safeguarding within the school is effective.

Pupils are beginning to take more pride in their work and presentation is improving. The school has set out its expectations clearly and pupils understand the reasons for insisting on neat work, well displayed. Where lessons are interesting and engaging, it is noticeable that pupils take considerably more pride in their work.

The leadership of special educational needs remains weak. A full audit undertaken by the local authority identified a significant number of weaknesses. Although there is now more accurate identification of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, they are not receiving the support which would enable them to make rapid progress. There is insufficient tracking of their progress by the special needs department. The action plan for improvement by the department is not being acted on quickly enough.

The school has rightly recognised the importance of literacy and oracy and has provided staff training to coordinate different approaches to this issue. However, training is not always followed up and in too many lessons teachers still allow one-word answers.

Middle leaders have responded well to the increased demands on them to analyse performance more sharply, so that they can intervene more quickly. They are held to account tightly for this in their regular weekly meetings with senior managers. As a result, interventions have been put in place much more rapidly and this is having a positive impact on pupil progress.

You and your senior team have a realistic understanding of the areas for development within the school and the progress which has been made so far. The new systems for measuring performance data are robust and allow leaders to identify quickly the performance of individual groups. However, evaluations of the impact of the new initiatives, while accurate, are not always sufficiently sharp or detailed.

The trust is providing focused support for the school through its chief executive officer. He and another director have acted as mentors to you and he has provided support and advice over human resource issues and has sat in on meetings with heads of faculties over performance data. The local advisory board provides a good level of challenge and support and knows the school well.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weakness designation.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcia Headon  
**Ofsted inspector**