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Mr Gary Hill
Acting Headteacher
The ACE Academy
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Dear Mr Hill

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 20–21 June 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 January 2017.

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 is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local academy board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sandwell. This letter will be

published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2017.

- Urgently act to develop a culture of safeguarding in the school through improving pupils' behaviour and attendance by ensuring that:
 - teachers set activities which motivate pupils in their learning
 - all teachers improve pupils' behaviour by consistently following the school's behaviour policy
 - leaders monitor closely the effectiveness of strategies to improve pupils' behaviour and attendance, particularly for those pupils who have received more than one fixed-term exclusion and/or have regular periods of absence.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that achievement of pupils, especially at key stages 3 and 4, accelerates rapidly, by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - ensuring that teachers plan lessons where learning is engaging, effective and prepares pupils for the new and more demanding GCSEs
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information to set work which matches pupils' needs.
- Improve the impact of leadership at all levels in driving improvements, by:
 - ensuring that all leaders are quick to tackle any underperformance in their areas of responsibility, especially in relation to implementing the school's policies on behaviour and assessment
 - effectively monitoring all improvement activities, including those for which the school receives additional funding, to evaluate their impact and relevance to the school's key priorities and the core purpose of improving teaching and learning
 - analysing and addressing the barriers to pupils' progress, especially for boys, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils and the most able
 - insisting that teachers consistently follow the school's policies, including those on assessment and behaviour management
 - listening to the views of parents when planning and evaluating the school's work.

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

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

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 20 to 21 June 2017

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, other leaders and members of staff, the chief executive and director of finance for the trust and a group of pupils. He spoke by telephone to the chair and vice-chair of the local academy board (LAB). He conducted learning walks with three different senior leaders observing parts of nine lessons in mathematics, eight in English and seven in a range of other subjects.

Context

The current acting headteacher has been in post since September 2016. The current chair of the LAB had been in post for just two weeks at the time of the inspection visit. The special educational needs coordinator was appointed from April 2017. Two lead practitioners have recently taken up their posts with two further appointments in English and science due to start in September 2017.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The rate of progress in addressing the key areas for improvement has been accelerated since your appointment. There have been significant improvements in behaviour and arrangements for safeguarding. Teaching and learning are getting better.

The school now meets all its statutory duties for safeguarding. Staff are well trained for their specialist roles and leaders have ensured that the culture of safety is much stronger. The school is now seeking to gain external accreditation for its work on anti-bullying.

The senior leadership team has been rationalised and restructured. This allows for greater clarity in roles, responsibilities and accountability within the smaller team that will be in place from September 2017.

Senior leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. They have training programmes in place, tailored to individual needs, ranging from improving inadequate teaching to getting more good teaching to outstanding. The appointment of lead practitioners is adding capacity to the leadership and quality of teaching, including in mathematics, which is an area of concern identified by pupils.

The school's leaders are being held to account through the work of the school's improvement partner and external reviews, including one very recently of the whole

school, special educational needs, governance and the pupil premium. You have been active in seeking out good practice beyond the trust, in the local authority and further afield.

Leaders have ensured that there is greater consistency in applying the behaviour policy in lessons. Assessment information in subjects such as English are used more consistently to inform teachers' planning and next steps for pupils' learning.

Leaders are now more detailed in their analysis of the progress of different groups of pupils including boys, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They have enhanced their evaluation of the impact of additional funding to improve outcomes for these pupil groups. Barriers have been identified to enable the school to plan appropriate provision for these pupils. However, overall outcomes, although improving slowly, remain very low in key stage 4 including for these groups of pupils. Work to monitor the progress of pupils who speak English as an additional language is less well developed.

New leadership of special educational needs and/or disabilities has led to a significant reduction in the very high number of pupils on the special educational needs register. Over 30% of all pupils were previously on the register as staff were too ready to identify pupils as having behavioural and emotional needs. The school was unable to meet the needs of such a high number of pupils effectively. Conversely, hardly any pupils were identified on the special educational needs register as having learning difficulties.

Reviews have been carried out on the impact of pupil premium funding. These concluded that to date it has had insufficient impact on outcomes. However, the difference in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally is diminishing slowly. Leaders are now evaluating in more detail which strategies are working and which are not, leading to those that are ineffective being discontinued or replaced. According to leaders, there is currently no sharing of pupil premium practice across the trust. Almost all pupils currently in the alternative provision centre are disadvantaged.

The trust and school have struggled to recruit staff. At the time of the inspection some leadership and teaching posts remained unfilled including that of the substantive headteacher. A further change of leadership in the summer is presenting uncertainties over the school's capacity to improve further. In science, the post of head of department is still vacant. The shortage of science teachers has led to a reduction in time for science on the curriculum. The school has had more success in recruiting additional mathematics teachers.

A review of governance has been carried out, the result of which has not yet been published. Governors are now more aware of aspects of the school including finances and outcomes but have responded slowly to address weaknesses. The financial restraints caused by the budget deficit are a further barrier to

improvement.

Leaders have begun to engage more with parents through a parents' forum open to any parent to attend. Where pupils have specific needs, either in the alternative provision centre or on the special educational needs register, leaders are involving parents more in decisions about their children. Of the very small number of parents who responded to the online Parent View none said they would recommend the school to another parent.

The website still does not comply with government requirements for what academies should publish concerning special educational needs and disabilities, governance and curriculum.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Pupils are now making more rapid progress from a very low base as a result of improved teaching, including in mathematics, where teaching has previously been weak. Information provided by the school indicates that the proportion of teaching that is good or better over time is now rising.

Pupils spoke positively about English, art, computing and vocational subjects, where teaching is stronger. In English, for example, pupils are motivated through high teacher expectations. Teachers focus on assessment through 'all', 'challenge' and 'expert' tasks so that pupils know clearly how to improve to reach their targets. They respond well to the activities, enabling them to discuss their work with others.

Some tasks set in languages and 'solace' (humanities) are low level and undemanding and do not set high enough expectations for pupils, especially the most able. They do not engage pupils' interest sufficiently well or enable them to make rapid progress. Although pupils start their GCSE courses in Year 9 they are not yet engaging consistently enough in the higher level of challenge required for GCSE.

Pupils, while recognising improvements, still expressed concerns about the quality of teaching in mathematics and science. They continued to complain about the inconsistent quality of supply teaching but acknowledged that the proportion of lessons covered by temporary staff was reducing.

Too often in mathematics pupils work at the same level of difficulty on tasks. With a few exceptions, teaching in mathematics does not sufficiently engage the interest and enthusiasm of pupils. Pupils reported that constantly answering questions from a text book was very repetitive and uninspiring. They have few opportunities for problem-solving or working in greater depth. Occasionally pupils are enthused

through activities, for example in a Year 8 lotto game where pupils had to solve graph problems.

When pupils are reading silently, either in lessons or tutor groups, teachers do not check consistently enough whether pupils have chosen material appropriate to their age and at the right level of challenge for them.

Most of the very small number of parents who responded to the online Parent View disagreed that their children are taught well.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour is improving. Along corridors, in the canteen and outside there is generally a calm and orderly environment, albeit with a very high presence of staff. Any isolated incidents of disorderly behaviour are dealt with quickly.

In most lessons seen pupils behaved well and no incidents of serious disruptive behaviour were seen during the inspection visit. There is now greater consistency in teachers deploying the behaviour code of conduct. Pupils remarked positively that this had led to improvements in behaviour. Pupils reported there are no longer fights in the classroom. There are still occasionally incidents outside but far fewer than before and those that occur are dealt with appropriately.

In some lessons, including in mathematics, there are still times when pupils are talking when the teacher is addressing the class. There were a few occasions when teachers had to deal with immature pupil behaviour or disrespect shown towards them.

The large majority of pupils spoken to thought that behaviour had improved, although incidents of bullying still happened. Most pupils said that they feel safe, although they highlighted one area of the school where they did not. This area was immediately shut off at breaktimes when reported to senior leaders. Most pupils said that there was less derogatory name-calling or racist remarks although a few pupils said it still happened. Not all pupils were prepared to report name-calling to staff. Sixth formers have made themselves available as peer mediators.

The school has set up an alternative provision centre in order to reduce exclusions. This has led to a big fall in the number of permanent exclusions. Pupils in the centre are motivated in their learning. However, they study a reduced number of subjects and are currently on part-time timetables. In a computer lesson seen, on designing a slide show presentation, pupils were fully engaged and enjoying their learning. Pupils spoken to who do not attend the centre perceived that those in the centre were being rewarded for poor behaviour and received treats and trips. Pupils wanted to see more rewards for those who behave well.

The rate of fixed-term exclusions and weekly behaviour incidents is also falling rapidly but is still too high. Leaders are analysing trends and patterns in more detail and putting programmes in place more suited to individual needs.

The level of absence is increasing. Leaders have been unable to improve the already low level of attendance, including for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs. This remains an area of concern which has not been tackled with enough rigour. For much of the autumn term the school was without an attendance officer. An appointment was made in January 2017, which is starting to lead to improvements.

Pupils are engaged well in tutor time in silent reading or preparing their curriculum vitae to apply for jobs.

Most of the very small number of parents who responded to the online Parent View disagreed that the school manages behaviour well.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes are set to improve for pupils at GCSE in 2017, although from an exceptionally low base, compared to 2016. In 2016 progress and attainment were exceptionally low across almost all subject and pupil groups.

Too much inadequate teaching and misbehaviour over time has meant that pupils currently in the school have not made enough progress from their starting points at the end of key stage 2. Pupil groups including the most able, boys, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have not made enough progress.

School performance information shows that in both Year 10 and 11 the rate of progress for pupils has improved from its low base. This has followed improvements in pupil behaviour and teaching. Some progress has been made in diminishing the difference in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils compared to all pupils nationally.

External support

The trust has been slow to respond to tackling previously identified weaknesses in leadership and governance and to address the financial concerns in the school. Consequently it has had limited impact over time.

The trust were responsible for the appointment of the acting headteacher, which is leading to improvements. The school receives effective support and challenge through the trust's school improvement partner. More recently, the trust has conducted a series of reviews of aspects of the school's work and is now tackling the financial deficit with greater rigour than previously. Communication has improved through a weekly trust newsletter.

Leaders are engaging well with schools outside of the trust, locally and further afield, in order to identify features of outstanding secondary practice that are not

present in trust schools.