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Mr Roger Burman
Executive Principal
The Aylesbury Vale Academy
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Dear Mr Burman

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of The Aylesbury Vale Academy

Following my visit to your school on 11 July 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 that 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 November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the executive principal, the chair of the governing body and a foundation governor, as well as with representatives of the school's sponsors, the Diocese of Oxford and Buckinghamshire County Council. I also spoke informally with parents at the start of the day, met with subject leaders and teachers and spoke to two groups of pupils. I carried out learning walks with the executive principal and with the primary headteacher and I reviewed a sample of pupils' work. I checked the school's single central record, and spoke to the designated safeguarding lead. I reviewed the school's combined statement of action and strategic plan, as well as a range of other documents. These included minutes of governing body meetings, minutes of a progress meeting between sponsors, governors and senior leaders, and records of visits by advisers from the Diocese of Oxford and Buckinghamshire County Council.

Context

Since the previous inspection, a large number of teachers have left the school. Four new subject leaders have been appointed, including in English and mathematics, and one subject leader will start in September. Some classes are currently taught by supply or agency staff. The primary school is fully staffed for September, but a small number of vacancies remain in the secondary school.

The quality of leadership and management at the academy

Sponsors and governors have not responded with sufficient urgency to the issues identified at the previous inspection. As a result, they are not taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation. In contrast, leaders' decisive action to improve teaching and behaviour is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' progress.

The previous inspection report stated that external, independent reviews of governance and of the school's use of the pupil premium should be carried out. However, the findings of a recently commissioned external review of governance have not yet been published or acted upon. In addition, while one of the sponsors has carried out a review of the school's use of the pupil premium, the required external review has not yet taken place. The combined statement of action and strategic plan outlines appropriate actions, success criteria and timescales to address many of the issues raised in the previous inspection report. However, arrangements for monitoring progress against the plan are unclear, and the most recent evaluations of impact lack sufficient detail. Therefore, the statement of action is not fit for purpose. The Diocese of Oxford has set up a committee to oversee the school's progress and ensure good communication between leaders, governors and sponsors. This forum shows early promise, but it has only met once, and so has not yet had any discernible impact on the pace of improvement.

The sponsors have not done enough to challenge ineffective governance. Since the previous inspection, there have been several changes to the composition of the governing body. There are unfilled vacancies, and the attendance of some governors at meetings is patchy. The remaining governors, including the recently appointed chair, are committed to the success of the school. However, they are few in number and so lack sufficient capacity to carry out their statutory duties effectively. The Diocese of Oxford recently carried out an internal review of governance. However, decisions about the eventual structure of the governing body have not yet been made. This has led to drift and delay. As a result, governors have not addressed key areas of the school's work. For example, much of the information for parents on the school's website is out of date and governors have not yet tackled important issues relating to health and safety. Minutes of governing body meetings reveal that some action has been taken to harmonise the work of the primary and secondary phases. For example, a single governors' committee now oversees pupils' progress across the school and there is a single lead for

safeguarding. However, minutes also provide evidence of weak levels of challenge to leaders and poor decision-making by governors.

The tardy response of sponsors and governors to the previous inspection report contrasts with the energy with which the executive principal and his team have begun to address weaknesses in teaching, learning and assessment. Since the previous inspection, the executive principal has established clear expectations, which have helped to foster greater consistency in teaching. A rigorous programme of lesson observations has ensured that all teachers receive detailed feedback on their performance. Teachers also benefit from regular training, which is often delivered by the school's most effective teachers. Subject leaders, in particular those who have been recently appointed, play an increasingly important role in improving the quality of teaching. Where the quality of teaching falls short of the executive principal's high expectations, teachers are given targets to meet and additional coaching support. In many cases, this support has enabled those teachers to improve their performance. However, a significant number of teachers, some of whom held leadership positions, have left the school. Leaders are leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to recruit high-quality teachers to replace those who have left. However, some classes are taught by temporary or non-specialist teachers while replacements are sought. As a result, the overall quality of teaching is improving rapidly, but remains variable

The school is a calm and orderly environment, in which pupils feel safe and happy. At the time of the monitoring inspection, pupils were excited about the forthcoming production of 'We Will Rock You'. Pupils say that most of the teaching is better than it was last year. They also say that they get helpful feedback on their work and behaviour has improved. Teachers and pupils comment favourably on the fact that the executive principal is a highly visible figure in classrooms and in corridors. In most lessons, pupils pay attention to their teachers, take pride in their work and try their best. However, while fixed-term exclusions have fallen sharply, the proportion of permanent exclusions remains much higher than that found nationally, including for disadvantaged pupils.

Pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are beginning to make stronger progress in their learning than they did last year. Outcomes for children in the early years are in line with national averages, while the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in phonics is likely to exceed national averages. The school's assessment information shows that the majority of pupils in key stages 1 and 2 are making progress that is in line with expectations for pupils of their age. In the primary phase, the differences between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils are diminishing rapidly. However, pupils' progress and attainment in key stages 3 and 4 are below the aspirational targets set for them. In addition, the gap between disadvantaged pupils' progress and that of other pupils remains too wide. Outcomes at key stage 4 are likely to remain below national averages in 2017.

School leaders recognise that the two sponsors, in particular the Diocese of Oxford, have significantly increased the amount of support provided since the previous inspection. For example, the Diocese of Oxford has allocated over 30 days of adviser time to improving safeguarding, governance, the use of the pupil premium and the quality of subject leadership. The reports arising from these visits give leaders helpful advice which they value. This is particularly true of a recent review of safeguarding, which gave clear and precise targets for improvement. However, many reports do not give clear enough guidance on when recommended actions should be completed or by whom. This makes it difficult for governors and other stakeholders to monitor the impact of the support.

In order to address the issues identified in this visit, sponsors, governors and leaders should take urgent action to:

- clarify the role of the two sponsors, so it is clear how governors are supported and held to account
- ensure that the governing body has sufficient capacity to carry out its statutory roles to a high standard, including the performance management of the executive principal
- ensure that the findings of the recently commissioned external review of governance are acted on promptly
- commission an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium, and ensure that its findings are acted on promptly.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's combined statement of action and improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Gary Holden
Her Majesty's Inspector