

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Phil Hearne
Acting Headteacher
The ACE Academy
Alexandra Road
Tipton
West Midlands
DY4 7NR

Dear Mr Hearne

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit with Jacqui Newsome and David Hughes, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 14 and 15 December 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2017. 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 interim academy board, the regional schools commissioner, the director of children's services for Sandwell and the chief executive officer or equivalent of the multi-academy trust. 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 the 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 and 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 second monitoring inspection on 14 and 15 December 2017

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, other leaders and members of staff, the director of finance for the Education Central Multi-Academy Trust and two groups of pupils. The lead inspector spoke by telephone to the chair of the interim academy board (IAB). Inspectors conducted learning walks and lesson observations with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors took account of the 71 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View.

Context

The current acting headteacher has been in post since September 2017, replacing the previous acting headteacher who left in July. The school has been issued with an internal financial notice to improve by the trust as result of its current deficit. The local academy board (LAB) was replaced in July 2017 by an IAB. The size of the senior leadership team has been reduced since the previous monitoring visit. Two additional lead teachers have been appointed in mathematics and science. The school was closed earlier in the week of the inspection, due to snow, causing the inspection visit to be delayed. Year 11 pupils were out on work experience during the inspection visit. The acting headteacher was absent from mid-day of the first inspection day.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since your recent appointment, you have maintained and built on the improvements made by your predecessor. The smaller leadership team is now clearly focused on teaching, learning and outcomes for pupils, which has led to improvements in these areas.

Arrangements for safeguarding continue to be rigorous. The culture among the staff is one of vigilance. Leaders ensure that staff at all levels are well trained and know what to do should an incident arise.

There have been improvements in provision and behaviour in mathematics lessons. Attitudes to learning from pupils are much more positive, and although the quality of teaching in mathematics remains mixed, some teaching in the subject is now good.

The new assessment system is potentially rigorous and allows subject leaders and teachers to track the progress of individual pupils and groups in each class and across year groups. Leaders have ensured, through moderation and closer monitoring, that the information entered by teachers is more accurate. Previous years' predictions of academic results were too generous, but in 2017 they were

closer to the actual GCSE results achieved.

Work to monitor the progress of pupils who are learning English as an additional language remains at an early stage of development.

The constraints of the school's large and growing deficit has meant that additional funding for pupils who have special education needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, the Year 7 catch-up premium for literacy and numeracy, and the pupil premium for disadvantaged pupils have largely gone into the school's overall budget to pay staff costs. As a result, these additional funding streams are not sufficiently targeted at eligible pupils.

The school meets its statutory duties towards pupils who have a statement of special educational needs and those with education, health and care plans. However, leaders have little resource or capacity to meet the needs of the larger number of other pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and are eligible for additional support. Consequently, although all these pupils receive support plans, these plans are, in effect, not delivered. The number of pupils identified on the SEN and/or disabilities register has fallen but is still high.

An external review of the use of the pupil premium showed that it was having little impact on outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Until the school is in a financial position to dedicate these funds to specifically support disadvantaged pupils, this will remain a barrier to improving outcomes for this group of pupils.

There remains uncertainty over the future direction of the school following the appointment of another interim headteacher. The trust has been unable to appoint a substantive headteacher after two attempts. This, combined with the financial deficit and difficulties in recruitment and retention, present leaders with significant challenges in their work to improve the school.

The two-year key stage 3 curriculum in Years 7 and 8 does not prepare pupils well for some GCSE subjects, all of which start in Year 9. Younger pupils currently in Year 7 welcomed the 'solace' programme as a transition from primary to secondary school. They demonstrated well their understanding of other faiths through a presentation on Sikh weddings and Hindu funeral rites. Older pupils spoken to, who are now in Year 9 studying GCSE courses, felt that they had missed out on some subjects in Years 7 and 8, including geography and languages.

Following a review of governance, the LAB was replaced with a small IAB. The new board is well informed about outcomes, absence and exclusions but has been slow to act. Since its members were appointed in July 2017, there has been little engagement with the headteacher and senior leaders. At the time of the inspection visit, they had not yet fulfilled their statutory duties to appoint a named governor for safeguarding and for provision and support for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. They have not sufficiently challenged leaders on the impact on

outcomes of additional spending, including the Year 7 catch-up premium, pupil premium and funding for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.

Communication with parents has continued to improve through parent forums and regular newsletters. Feedback from Parent View is more positive than before. Much higher numbers of parents than previously have expressed their views. A majority of those responding now said that they would recommend the school to other parents. The percentage satisfied with other aspects of the work of the school is now a small majority, compared to a large minority previously.

The website still does not comply with government requirements for what academies should publish concerning governance, the curriculum, the use and impact of pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up funding.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching and learning has continued to improve, which has led to improved outcomes at GCSE for pupils at the end of Year 11 in 2017. There remain inconsistencies in the quality of teaching over time, including in English, mathematics and science, as well as in other subjects.

There are good relationships between adults and pupils and between groups of pupils. Pupils work maturely and sensibly when they have group discussions, for example when conducting research in sociology.

There are still too many times when some pupils become disengaged during lessons, usually linked to the quality of teaching. This does not interfere with the learning of other pupils, but does lead to those pupils concerned not completing their work.

Teachers are consistent in planning learning objectives for pupils from different starting points. These are entitled 'all', 'challenge' and 'expert' (and in one instance, 'super-expert'), in line with the school's policy for assessment. Pupils get choices about which learning objective to complete.

The impact of this is variable, however. Pupils are not consistently clear about which of the different learning objectives set by teachers apply to them. In some lessons, however, the GCSE grade is linked to each of the learning objectives so that pupils have a good idea of which activity they should be working on.

Teachers' expectations for most-able pupils are too low. Where all pupils start on the same less challenging task, most-able pupils do not get time to move on to the more challenging work. Conversely, in some instances, where most-able pupils finish their work early, they waste learning time waiting for others to finish. There is very little additional support for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities in lessons. Their support plans are vague and generic and, as a result, subject

teachers are not consistent in meeting the needs of this group of pupils in lessons.

Marking is in line with the school's policies for assessment. However, where extension tasks are set, they are not consistently followed through by pupils or teachers, and when pupils are asked to complete unfinished work, it is not followed up routinely by teachers. Expectations of pupils' presentation of work are low.

Half-termly target sheets in pupils' books contain their predicted and actual grades. However, the extent to which these are completed by teachers, in line with the school policy, is variable. Where they are completed, there is too often a mismatch between pupils' targets for where they should now be (based on previous assessment information) and their current performance. Pupils who were underperforming who spoke to inspectors were often not sure of the reasons for their underperformance and were not able to say what they needed to do to catch up. In some instances, pupils had already exceeded their end-of-year targets.

Gaps in pupils' learning in the key stage 3 curriculum, for example in geography, mean that in some subjects, pupils are not well prepared for the demands of the key stage 4 course. In physical education (PE), one group of pupils had switched from a GCSE course to a BTEC qualification because they found the work too hard.

Pupils spoken to from key stages 3 and 4 had mixed views about which were their favourite and least favourite subjects. They consistently said that they liked PE. There was no consistent opinion about other subjects. They reported that some of the temporary cover teaching was not effective.

Just over half of the parents who responded to the online survey, Parent View, agreed that their children are taught well.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

There is a calm, orderly atmosphere around the school, including in lessons and at breaktimes. No boisterous or irresponsible behaviour was seen during the inspection despite the snow still lying around. There is a strong presence of staff around the building and pupils move swiftly to their lessons. Leaders have ensured that staff apply the behaviour policy consistently. The need to apply the sanctions was very rare during the inspection visit because pupils behaved well. In the classrooms, there is a better environment for learning, largely free of disruptive behaviour. Despite the large amount of snow still lying around at the time of the inspection and the excitement of Christmas, pupils behaved sensibly and maturely when moving around the school grounds.

The numbers of exclusions have fallen significantly this term compared with the autumn term last year. This is the result of consistent implementation of the behaviour policy. Those previously excluded or at risk of exclusion are now engaged well in alternative provision. They study a wider range of subjects than previously

and are taught by subject-specialist teachers. The time of their school day has been extended so that it is almost in line with that for all other pupils. To avoid contact with other pupils, they now arrive a few minutes later and leave a few minutes earlier.

There is still some disengagement of pupils in lessons. This is usually linked to the quality of teaching provided by temporary or cover staff, work that is undemanding and pupils finishing their work early and 'switching off'.

Attendance remains low but is improving. Similarly, persistent absence, although still too high, is falling. Leaders have identified key groups of pupils whose attendance is a concern, including White British boys, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, and disadvantaged pupils. Measures taken to date have had limited effect on the attendance of these pupil groups. Attendance was disrupted during the week of the inspection because of the snow.

Pupils spoken to have noticed the positive changes in attendance and behaviour, including the fact that teachers now manage behaviour more consistently.

A large minority of the parents who responded to the online survey, Parent View, did not agree that the school makes sure that its pupils are well behaved.

Most pupils spoken to said that they feel safe in school. They are reassured by the presence of staff and feel confident in reporting any incidents that occur.

The extent to which tutor time is used productively is variable. Observation during the inspection indicated that in some cases, pupils were engaged well in a thought-provoking activity and discussion about bullying. In other instances, pupils were just left to do what they wanted, sometimes reading, and at other times chatting with each other. These observations reflected leaders' evaluation of the quality of tutor time.

Outcomes for pupils

As predicted by the school, outcomes at GCSE for pupils at the end of Year 11 improved in 2017, compared with the previous year's exceptionally low results. The rate of progress from the end of key stage 2 improved and the gap between attainment in the school and the national average narrowed. The proportion of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) (English, mathematics, science, languages and humanities) doubled from 3% in 2016 to 6%. The proportion entered for the E-Bacc more than doubled from 9% to 20%.

The proportion of Year 11 pupils going on to further education and employment also improved and is now close to the national average. Overall, however, both progress and attainment were still unacceptably low in 2017, given Year 11 pupils' favourable outcomes when they were at the end of key stage 2.

Outcomes for the current Year 11 pupils indicate a similar picture of underachievement based on their current rates of progress. However, the progress of current Year 10 pupils indicates some improvement on the previous year. At the time of the inspection, up-to-date assessment information was unavailable for pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9.

The school's assessment information and work in pupils' books present a mixed picture of progress across year groups and subjects. Overall, lower attaining pupils have made more progress than most-able pupils. Groups of pupils not making enough progress include White British boys, most-able pupils, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, and disadvantaged pupils. Pupils for whom English is an additional language have made progress in line with all pupils nationally from key stage 2 to key stage 4, but they represent a small proportion of the school population.

Improvements in behaviour and teaching are not yet leading to enough progress overall because, for older pupils, there is a long legacy of underachievement over many years. Specific groups are not making enough progress because additional funding, including that for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up funding in literacy and numeracy, is not targeted sufficiently to meet their needs.

External support

The school has conducted external reviews of governance and the use of pupil premium funding. The review of governance led to the disbanding of the LAB and its replacement with an IAB. The review of pupil premium funding concluded that the expenditure had had little impact on outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. However, this review has not led to any significant changes because leaders continue to use the funds to offset the school's deficit.

Work with other schools outside the trust is at an early stage of development. There are plans in place to collaborate with outstanding local providers on a teacher development programme and on attendance issues.

The school receives appropriate SEN support from the local authority on training, policy information, and access to specialist services and funding.