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10 April 2018

Mrs K Kernan  
Interim Headteacher  
The ACE Academy  
Alexandra Road  
Tipton  
West Midlands  
DY4 7NR

Dear Mrs Kernan

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy**

Following my visit with Jacqui Newsome and David Hughes, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 21 and 22 March 2018, 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 third 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 not 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 advisory board, the regional schools commissioner, the director of children's services for Sandwell and the chief executive officer 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 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 who have special educational needs (SEN) 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 third monitoring inspection on 21 to 22 March 2018**

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, other leaders and members of staff, the director of secondary academies for the Education Central Multi-Academy Trust and two groups of pupils. The lead inspector spoke by telephone to the chair of the interim advisory board (IAB). Inspectors conducted learning walks and lesson observations with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors took account of the 13 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View.

### **Context**

The previous acting headteacher, who had been appointed in September 2017, left in January 2018. The senior deputy headteacher was appointed acting headteacher until the end of the current school year. No additional appointments to the senior leadership team have been made since the previous acting headteacher left in January. This has led to a redistribution of responsibilities among some of the existing senior leaders. An acting head of science took up his post the day before the monitoring visit was announced. There is no permanent head of modern foreign languages. Many staffing vacancies remain. At the time of the inspection visit there were 22 posts covered as a result of vacancies, absence or illness. The school continues to be under an internal financial notice to improve by the trust as a result of its current deficit.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

Your appointment as acting headteacher, fully supported by the senior leadership team, has brought stability to the school. This follows the departure of two acting headteachers within six months. Your self-evaluation of the school and what needs to be done to address its underperformance is accurate. However, it is clear from the evidence gathered by inspectors that your work to address this underperformance is constrained by a number of factors. This includes uncertainty about the strategic direction of the school and the current financial restraints.

The restraints put in place by the trust through the financial notice to improve means the school's leaders cannot make financial decisions independently that could benefit pupils preparing for GCSE examinations, or support pupils who need to catch up. Any additional funding the school receives, such as the pupil premium funding or Year 7 catch-up premium, is being used largely to cover essential staffing costs. An external review of pupil premium spending has been carried out but its recommendation to redirect funding has not been implemented due to the trust's financial constraints placed on the school. Lack of funding is also restricting leaders' access to external support.

Few pupils in Years 7 and 8 are receiving languages lessons and not all study performing arts on the curriculum because of the shortage of appropriate teachers. Therefore, the school is not promoting equality of opportunity because only pupils in the top sets in key stage 3 currently study a language or performing arts. Leaders recognise the weaknesses in the current curriculum, particularly in key stage 3 and have put in place appropriate proposals for September 2018.

The IAB, set up in July 2017 to replace the previous underperforming local academy board, does not provide sufficient support or challenge to the school's leaders. It has met three times formally since it was established. Attendance at these meetings has been sporadic, as they are scheduled in the daytime when governors with day jobs have difficulty in attending. The IAB has still not appointed a nominated special educational needs (SEN) governor (a statutory duty). The IAB is overly dependent on members of the trust who also sit on the board. This diminishes the objectivity that should exist between governance and the trust. It inhibits governors from supporting the school if they need to challenge the trust, for example on financial constraints.

There is a calm ethos around the school, where behaviour has continued to improve, both in lessons and around the school site. Older pupils spoken to by inspectors commented on the improvements they have seen since they first joined the school. Younger pupils spoken to, who did not experience the previous poor behaviour, were less impressed. This is in line with your recognition and inspection evidence that pupils in key stage 3 have had more experience of cover teachers than in key stage 4 and gaps in their curriculum.

The strong culture of safeguarding has been maintained. Staff are well informed and kept up to date about what to do should a safeguarding incident arise. Leaders make the necessary checks to ensure that the school meets its requirements. The IAB has appointed a governor who is checking that the school is meeting its statutory responsibilities. The majority of parents responding to Parent View agreed that their children feel safe in school and are well looked after. This was confirmed by those pupils spoken to.

Leaders are trying to maximise the GCSE results for current Year 11 pupils in the context of a legacy of previous inadequate teaching. Leaders recognise that progress in Years 7 to 10 remains low. Similarly there are few signs of progress improving (other than in Year 11) for specific groups of pupils, including pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, boys, disadvantaged pupils and most-able pupils.

Where leaders have been able to influence teaching and staff development for permanent teaching staff they have demonstrated a capacity to improve. They have rightly recognised those teachers who require support plans. Inspectors saw clear evidence of how support and challenge are leading to improvements. The programme of training for teachers is appropriately targeted and there are now

regular opportunities for teachers to share good practice with each other. There is a regular cycle in place for heads of department to meet individual teachers to hold them to account. In turn, senior leaders hold review meetings with subject leaders. However, while there is so much cover teaching in the school, it is difficult for leaders to demonstrate that teaching overall is improving over time.

As a result of the new, detailed assessment tracking system leaders are able to analyse pupils' progress by subject, pupil group and teacher group. They can hold teachers to account for the progress of pupils. However, although the assessment information provided by teachers is more reliable in English and mathematics, this is not the case in other subjects such as science. Pupils learning English as an additional language have now all been assessed against the Department for Education's five-point fluency scale. However, leaders recognise that, without moderation, there is no guarantee that the assessments are accurate.

Leaders are developing middle leaders who have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in areas for which they have responsibility. Leaders have also taken steps to improve leadership of English as an additional language by making it the responsibility of a senior leader. There have also been improvements in the leadership of SEN. An SEN information report evaluating the impact on pupils' progress of additional funding has now been published. The number of pupils identified for support on the SEN register is reducing. Many of the previously inadequate support plans (known by the school as 'aspire' plans) for each pupil on the SEN register have been rewritten. Leaders recognise that there is limited intervention support they can provide to pupils who have SEN beyond those identified with statements of special educational needs or education, health and care plans. This is reflected in the new plans where responsibility falls to the teachers to develop support strategies, rather than relying on additional support which is unavailable. Leaders acknowledge that they have not as yet taken on the issue of monitoring the impact on pupils' progress of additional adults.

Leaders have continued to develop their work in engaging with parents. During the first day of the inspection visit they had set aside the afternoon to meet with parents to discuss their children's outcomes in the recent Year 11 mock examinations. The school has set up a parent forum which, although small in number, is growing and has representatives from Years 7 to 10. Although the small number of responses to Parent View paints a mixed picture, it is more positive than previously. Parents welcome the valuable information they receive from school. However, over half of parents who responded did not agree that the school makes sure their children are well behaved. The school has also conducted its own survey, with 129 responses. In contrast to the views of pupils spoken to, it was the parents of younger pupils who were more positive than those of older ones. However, the number of applications to the sixth form for September 2018 is considerably higher than in the previous year. This is a sign of increasing confidence in the school from the local community and among older

pupils.

Leaders have not yet resolved the inconsistencies in the quality of tutor group sessions observed during the previous monitoring visit. Some pupils remained in corridors well after the sessions were due to start. Consequently, sessions did not start on time or were interrupted by late arrivals. Pupils lacked urgency to get to them, demonstrating that they did not value tutor time at the end of the school day.

### **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

Teaching remains inadequate overall, despite improvements in the teaching of permanent staff. Recruitment of specialist teaching staff remains a significant challenge. The school has a number of vacancies for teaching and teaching assistant posts, which it has been unable to fill. Almost a third of classes are taken by cover teachers. A consequence of this is the number of classes taught by cover teachers who do not have the relevant subject specialisms. In modern languages, for example, there is currently only one (part time) teaching post for the whole school. The biggest burden is falling on key stage 3 as leaders try to plug gaps as best they can for GCSE classes. Subject leaders recognise there is also variability in the quality of teaching among the permanent staff, including in English, mathematics and science.

Teaching is improving where leaders have been able to work with teachers through support plans that accurately identify individual areas for development. However, too many pupils experience regular changes in cover teachers, where they have to take more responsibility for organising their own learning. The fact that many of these pupils remain motivated is a credit to them. In modern languages, for example, where there is a shortage of specialist teachers, pupils spoken to still had positive attitudes about the subject. They were keen to do well.

In lessons seen during the inspection visit teachers were consistently following the school behaviour policy. Pupils commented favourably on this. Where behaviour was less good it was usually because of new cover staff who were less secure in following procedures for managing behaviour.

Teachers' expectations are to some extent directed by the targets set by leaders, which leads to some targets being too high and others too low. Pupils have targets set based on their outcomes at key stage 2 in English and mathematics. For many older pupils they are well short of these now unrealistic targets, as their current and predicted grades indicate. The key stage 2 results in English and mathematics are also used to set targets for other subjects. Inspectors saw examples during the visit in other subjects, such as modern languages, where older pupils had targets of up to grade 9 at GCSE but were currently working at grades no higher than 3. In English, some pupils in Year 11 had a target of grade 7 yet were currently working at grade 1. Pupils spoken to by inspectors did not



know how they were going to close the gap between March and June. Some pupils said they were demotivated by retaining such high targets that they had no hope of achieving.

Conversely for pupils who speak English as an additional language, some of them received low targets. This is because when they were in key stage 2 they did not have sufficient English to reach the expected standard in English and mathematics. Now their fluency in English is much greater some of these pupils have already exceeded their targets. Targets are rarely revised mid-year in order to introduce a greater degree of challenge. Therefore, in these instances expectations for pupils are too low. There were good examples of the most-able pupils being stretched and challenged, for example in GCSE mathematics, to achieve the highest possible grade 9. This included pupils learning English as an additional language who had previously low starting points.

Through targeted specialist teaching, including the deployment of lead practitioners, additional support, after-school revision sessions and events planned for the Easter holidays, staff are now doing everything they can to help pupils catch up. Teachers have become more familiar with the demands of GCSE courses and are planning work accordingly. However, where pupils are working at a grade far lower than their target the lesson objectives set are unrealistic. In one instance, pupils working at grades 2 and 3 had grade 6 as the lowest level of challenge in the lesson.

Assessment information is more accurate in English and mathematics. In the recent Year 11 mock examinations in English, for example, the three GCSE examiners in the department marked all the pupils' papers. This provided an accurate picture of how pupils are doing and, through question analysis, where they need to improve further.

Response by pupils to teachers' feedback, in line with the school's policy, is too variable. In some instances teachers provide lengthy written feedback, which has had no impact on pupils' progress where pupils are unable or unwilling to respond to the development points given. Too often, pupils were unsure how to reach the next grade. 'Revise more', or 'remember stuff' were typical pupil responses.

There are strengths in teaching, including in art, technology, history, sociology and vocational subjects, and, although not as consistently, in English, mathematics and science. In the best teaching there are clear explanations given by teachers. Appropriate feedback and questioning is targeted at specific pupils. Expectations are high that work will be completed by pupils. Work is suitably planned to take account of pupils' different abilities and starting points. Pupils have the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas. Relationships between adults and pupils are strong.

Elsewhere, in other teaching, pupils take too long on activities so the pace of

learning slows. Pupils start work at the same point, regardless of their previous learning or their ability. Teachers do not check whether pupils are ready to move on to the next level of challenge. Pupils' self and peer assessment is not checked for its effectiveness. Where teaching is less effective for pupils learning English as an additional language or for those who have SEN and/or disabilities it is because they do not receive effective support. In these instances work is pitched at the same level of difficulty despite pupils working at different levels.

The impact of additional adult support on pupils' progress is variable. At its best, for example in a key stage 4 science lesson, the additional adult provided good subject knowledge, open-ended questioning and challenge which helped pupils move on in their learning. In other lessons, additional adults provide limited support other than performing tasks such as fetching equipment for pupils or doing the work for them. This limits pupils' opportunities to develop their own learning.

### **Personal development, behaviour and welfare**

Pupils' attitudes to learning and behaviour have continued to improve. This is a consequence of leaders setting high expectations of behaviour and conduct and consistently carrying out sanctions when required. Pupils deserve praise for their resilience, even when a cover teacher admits, 'I can't help you because I don't know the subject.' In these circumstances they are motivated to work out solutions for themselves or to work in collaboration with others.

During the visit there were occasions when pupils became disengaged as a result of being bored or finding the work too hard or easy. However, over the two days of the visit no low-level disruptive behaviour was seen in lessons that could have had a negative effect on the learning of others. There were occasional minor incidents of misbehaviour in corridors or around the school site but these were dealt with firmly by leaders.

The quality of pupils' work in their books is directly linked to the level of expectations set by teachers. In some instances work is well presented. For example, in GCSE sociology pupils' writing demonstrated a depth of maturity in discussing the arguments for and against the nuclear family. In other examples, too many books were full of loose sheets, unfinished or poorly written work. In the worst instances consistent graffiti was not addressed by teachers when marking books.

Fixed-term exclusions are lower compared to the similar period last year. The school's intervention centre is providing a suitable alternative to exclusion and enables pupils quickly to be reintegrated into lessons. However, school attendance remains low overall and is showing little sign of improving. Persistent absence is higher than at previous monitoring visits and rising.

An attempt to improve attendance by changing the time by which pupils receive an absent mark for being late from 9.30am to 11.00am has not made any

significant difference.

### **Outcomes for pupils**

Outcomes for pupils currently in Year 11 in English and mathematics have significantly improved in recent months, especially for those on track to achieve the higher 9 to 5 grades. This has been the result of specific targeted teaching and intensive support. However, overall Year 11 pupils are still well below where they should be, given their starting points at the beginning of Year 7.

The school's own assessment information indicates that current pupils in Years 7 to 10, including pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils, boys and most-able pupils, have not made enough progress from their starting points. Progress made by pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities in Year 7 is better than that made by other pupils in the same year group. However, in other year groups these pupils have made less progress than other pupils so the gap overall for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities is widening.

The school's data analysis indicates that a high proportion of pupils are working below their expected reading ages in Years 7 and 11. In both year groups a significant minority of pupils have regressed since they were previously assessed in Autumn 2017. Low reading ages are a significant barrier to pupils trying to access a range of GCSE subjects where the reading demands are much greater.

### **External support**

The school receives little external support or challenge because of the school's financial situation. It is working effectively with a partner school to provide teacher support and training. It is also working with the school to develop strategies to tackle attendance and persistent absence but to date this work has not led to improvements in attendance.