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Mr Iain Robinson
University of Chester CE Academy
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Dear Mr Robinson

Special measures monitoring inspection of University of Chester CE Academy

Following my visit to your school on 27–28 March 2018 with Claire Hollister, Ofsted Inspector, 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 April 2017.

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.

The trust's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plans are not fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Chester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire West and Chester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that the vision and ambitions of the multi-academy trust are evident in the work undertaken to drive rapid improvement in the quality of education
 - evaluating information about the behaviour, attendance and progress of underperforming groups of pupils more concisely so that those responsible for governance are better able to act swiftly on the information they receive
 - developing more focused and concise improvement plans
 - making criteria by which the success of actions in school improvement plans is judged more precisely so that leaders and governors can identify quickly when their policies are not having the intended impact
 - improving the effectiveness of senior leadership and the leadership of subject areas
 - securing the viability of the sixth form and its courses by ensuring that plans to increase the recruitment of students are implemented without delay.
- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that teachers develop a wider range of classroom strategies to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils, particularly those who are most able
 - making sure that the work takes into account pupils' capabilities and prior attainment so that all are challenged to make the progress of which they are capable, especially most-able pupils
 - increasing teachers' expectations of what all groups of pupils are capable of achieving
 - ensuring that teaching captures and retains pupils' interest
 - making sure that teachers and teaching assistants make more consistent use of the strategies and resources identified in individual learning plans to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - increasing rates of attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those whose attendance falls below 90%
 - working with parents, carers and external agencies to improve the poor behaviour of a significant minority of pupils
 - developing the skills of those teachers who struggle to manage behaviour and pupils' disengagement in their classrooms.

■ Raise pupils' attainment and progress by:

- ensuring that leaders identify the barriers to learning of disadvantaged pupils more precisely so that the link between barriers and actions for improvement is more explicit and the impact of spending of the pupil premium funding on attainment and progress is more measurable
- ensuring that teaching provides sufficient opportunity for pupils who have significant gaps in their learning to catch up rapidly with their peers, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities
- developing pupils' literacy skills systematically in all subject areas so that they are better able to express themselves orally and in extended writing
- ensuring that pupils develop the numeracy skills necessary to make good progress across the curriculum, particularly in science, geography and history
- implementing the curriculum, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities, in a way which focuses on extending pupils' transferable knowledge, skills and understanding
- ensuring that liaison with feeder primary schools includes the gathering of detailed information about what pupils have already achieved in each subject so that the curriculum does not repeat unnecessarily what has already been achieved.

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 pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 27 March 2018 to 28 March 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documentation and met with senior and middle leaders. Inspectors spoke with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT), the chair of the statement of action committee (SOAC), and the leader of the Cheshire Vale Teaching School Alliance (CVTSA). Inspectors met with groups of pupils and staff. They observed teaching and learning jointly with senior leaders, and scrutinised samples of pupils' work. Inspectors observed how pupils behaved around the school during break and lunchtime. They also considered the results of recent surveys that the school has conducted with staff and parents.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been considerable changes made to the school's teaching staff. Fourteen teachers have left the school, including five teachers of mathematics, four teachers of English, three teachers of modern foreign languages and two teachers of religious studies. The leaders of mathematics and modern foreign languages have also left. A new leader of modern foreign languages now works at the school, as does a teacher who contributes to the leadership of the mathematics department. A new leader of mathematics has been appointed and is due to start working at the school later in the academic year. There are currently a number of temporary teachers working at the school, particularly in the mathematics department, where the school has found it difficult to recruit teachers. Following the previous inspection, the school advertised for a permanent principal. However, no appointment was made and the acting principal continued in the role in an interim capacity. In January 2018, the acting principal's role became permanent, as did the acting vice-principal's role. The trust appointed a new CEO in October 2017. These changes in leadership slowed the school's response to the areas for improvement that were highlighted at the previous inspection. Furthermore, the school only received additional funding to finance the procurement of additional support in December 2017. Since January 2018, the school has greatly increased the scope of its work with specialist and national leaders of education from CVTSA.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have not ensured that enough progress has been made towards the removal of special measures. Although they have secured tangible improvements to pupils' behaviour and teaching in English, too little has been done to address weak teaching in mathematics, science, history and geography. Furthermore, there have been weaknesses in the strategic leadership of the school in the 11 months since

the previous inspection, that have resulted in leaders failing to address too many of the areas for improvement that were highlighted in the previous report. As a result, leaders have been unable to demonstrate that their work is having a broad and substantial impact on improving the quality of education offered by the school.

Despite this, there has been a notable quickening in the pace of change since November 2017. A new CEO was appointed to lead the trust in October 2017, and this has provided leaders with renewed impetus to address the school's weaknesses. In addition, the school received additional funding to procure extra support in December 2017. As a result, the scope and intensity of the school's work with staff from CVTSA has increased dramatically over the course of this term. In January 2018, the acting principal and vice-principal were made permanent in their roles. Senior leaders feel that they now have the freedom, authority and support to increase the intensity of their efforts to improve the school.

The principal is in the process of increasing the expectations of pupils and staff. He has made staff more accountable for the impact of their work by applying the school's systems for managing the performance of staff more rigorously. Leaders have also secured significant improvements to staff attendance through a more rigid application of the school's policies and procedures. Despite this, leaders have not yet ensured that staff, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities, share their expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving. As a result, too many teachers still have low expectations of pupils.

The principal and other senior leaders have secured the confidence of most staff, governors, trustees and other partners. Together, leaders have maintained relatively high morale during a period of turbulence. Leaders have also undertaken a great deal of work to refocus the school community on the school's core values. This has helped the whole school community to become more united and coherent. Alongside the improvements that have been made to behaviour, these developments represent essential preconditions for future growth.

Recent developments at trust level are also beginning to facilitate more rapid change. For example, the new CEO has increased the level of support offered by the University of Chester. He has also brokered an increasingly diverse range of support for the school. Furthermore, he has increased the school's autonomy, so leaders feel empowered to employ strategies that are appropriate given the school's context. For example, leaders feel the improvements to pupils' behaviour have been secured because they were allowed to introduce systems that are different to other schools within the trust. There has also been a noteworthy recent shift in the school's outlook. Leaders are now more open to working collaboratively with other organisations. Moreover, leaders understand the fundamental importance of working in partnership with others to build capacity at the school and secure sustainable improvement.

Governance has also been strengthened since the external review of governance. In

response to the review, new members joined the SOAC. Members are credible and have considerable experience of governance within successful multi-academy trusts. They provide leaders with sensitive and solution-focused challenge. Governors have also clarified their roles and responsibilities in relation to those of the trust board. As a result, they are more directly involved in holding leaders to account on a regular basis. Despite this, there are only three members on the SOAC. The committee is in the process of trying to recruit more members and they hope to secure greater representation from the local community.

The strategic leadership of teaching, learning and assessment is showing signs of improvement. Leaders have started to track the effectiveness of teaching closely against the teachers' standards. They have also developed mechanisms that are intended to improve the consistency of teaching. Leaders can provide examples of individual teachers improving their practice as a result of targeted programmes of support. Leaders have also improved the quality of teaching in English, and maintained strengths in the delivery of creative and vocational subjects. However, they have been unable to significantly improve the quality of teaching in mathematics, science and humanities. Leaders acknowledge that significant weaknesses remain in the teaching of these subjects. As a result, one vice-principal has recently been deployed to oversee the leadership of mathematics, while the other has started to work closely with staff in the science department.

Leaders have managed to maintain a similar number of students in the sixth form in comparison to the previous academic year. This is because leaders were able to double the number of students starting Year 12 in comparison to the previous year. This improvement was due to an effective campaign to market the sixth form to pupils in Year 11. Leaders have devised further plans alongside colleagues from the University of Chester to develop the curriculum for the next academic year. These plans will increase the school's offer of vocational courses, while offering all Year 11 pupils a potential pathway to higher education. Leaders are also in the process of developing the key stage 4 curriculum to offer pupils greater choice, and to provide pathways that align with those being developed in the sixth form.

It is therefore clearly evident that the pace of change has quickened considerably over the last five months. Despite this, there are still too many areas for improvement from the previous inspection that have not been addressed or have been tackled ineffectively. The school's improvement plans are unwieldy and do not provide a clear road map to improvement. Plans do not outline clearly what actions are to be taken; and leaders are still not using success criteria effectively. In some documents, such as the pupil premium plan and Year 7 catch-up plan, success criteria are vague and generalised. As a result, the precision with which leaders evaluate the quality of their work varies considerably. However, there are clear signs that this aspect of leadership is beginning to improve, with more astute evaluations of pupils' behaviour and the impact of different strategies to improve teaching.

The external review of the school's use of the pupil premium highlighted widespread weaknesses in the school's approach to improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Leaders have started to address the recommendations from the review in a systematic manner. However, their efforts to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils continue to be undermined by weaknesses in teaching.

Leaders have not yet systematically addressed the areas for improvement to do with the school's curriculum. The principal has recently begun to build relationships with leaders from feeder primary schools. However, staff have not ensured that the curriculums for pupils in Year 7 do not repeat unnecessarily what pupils have already learned. As a result, inspectors found evidence of pupils of different abilities repeating work that they can already do. This has contributed to the decline in the quality of work produced by many pupils in Year 7 since joining the school in September.

Middle leaders say that they feel revitalised by their work with specialist leaders of education from CVTSA. However, their work with these colleagues is in its early stages. As a result, other than in English, subject leaders are unable to highlight where they have had a significantly positive impact on improving teaching and pupils' outcomes.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders continue to demonstrate an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching at the school. However, apart from in English, they have been unable to orchestrate significant improvements to the quality of teaching. In particular, the quality of teaching in mathematics, science and humanities remains very poor. In these subjects, teachers typically have low expectations of what pupils can achieve and do not provide pupils of different abilities with work that challenges them to make sustained gains in their learning. As a result, some pupils quickly lose interest and many take little pride in the quality or presentation of their work. Furthermore, teaching is not providing sufficient support for pupils who have significant gaps in their learning.

There is also huge variability in the effectiveness of teachers' questioning. Many pupils are not in the habit of answering questions and are reluctant to speak in class. This is contributing to weaknesses in many pupils' understanding and their poor recall of prior learning. Too many teachers are not assessing pupils' understanding effectively during lessons. As a result, they are not identifying the misconceptions that pupils regularly develop.

Leaders have introduced systems that have increased teachers' awareness of which pupils are disadvantaged. However, little evidence was found to indicate that teachers have developed the range of strategies they employ within the classroom to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils. Furthermore, evidence from a scrutiny of disadvantaged pupils' work clearly indicates that these pupils, including the most able, are still making weak progress in comparison to others nationally.

Similarly, leaders have not ensured that teachers are making consistent use of the strategies identified in the individual learning plans to support pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Furthermore, scrutiny of work produced by a sample of these pupils indicates that the overall progress of pupils in this group is being undermined by weaknesses in teaching across much of the curriculum.

Pupils are not being supported effectively to develop their basic skills across the curriculum. The teaching of pupils' literacy skills in subjects other than English is tokenistic. Furthermore, teachers' expectations of pupils' written and spoken language are too low. As a result, poor literacy skills become a significant barrier to pupils' achievement across the curriculum. Leaders have not yet implemented a strategy to develop pupils' numeracy skills across the curriculum. This compounds the weak teaching that most pupils receive in mathematics.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Leaders have secured significant improvements to the quality of pupils' behaviour. Inspectors observed very few instances of poor behaviour in lessons, even when weaknesses in teaching were evident. Furthermore, pupils were seen to be sensible, considerate and mature during social times. Leaders attribute the improvements in behaviour to the rigid adherence to new behaviour management procedures that were introduced in November 2017. They also highlight the importance of improved training for staff on how to manage pupils' behaviour. Despite this, there has been a sharp increase in the amount of fixed-term exclusions this year. Rates of exclusion are now significantly above historic national averages. Furthermore, there has been a huge increase in the number of central detentions issued to pupils. For example, there were approximately 400 detentions issued in the week before the inspection. As a result, staff are still trying to improve the behaviour of a significant minority of pupils who regularly fail to meet the standards expected at the school.

Leaders have been unable to reduce rates of absence. Consequently, the amount of absence remains well above historic national averages. On the other hand, leaders have identified that there have been signs of improvement in attendance since January 2018. Attendance for pupils in Year 7 is also much higher than it is in other year groups. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from the school remains high, but has dropped marginally from last year. Leaders have demonstrated that they have been able to support a small group of pupils to improve their attendance through careful guidance and appropriate intervention. However, rates of absence among disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities remain higher than for others at the school and nationally.

Outcomes for pupils

The results achieved by pupils in Year 11 at the end of the last academic year indicate that they had made inadequate progress during their time at the school.

Pupils' outcomes were clearly inadequate in mathematics, English, science and humanities. Furthermore, the amount of progress made by pupils in English was considerably lower than the previous year despite leaders anticipating improvement. Positively, pupils made faster progress in arts and vocational subjects than previously, which further highlights the discrepancy in the quality of teaching in these subjects compared to traditional academic subjects. The amount of progress made by students on A-level courses dropped dramatically last year, despite leaders' tracking information indicating that students were making faster progress than previously. However, students made faster progress on vocational courses in the sixth form and their progress was broadly in line with national averages.

Leaders are under no illusion that Year 11 outcomes are likely to remain inadequate this year. However, their tracking information indicates that the current Year 11 pupils have already made more progress by this time of year compared to their counterparts last year. As a result, leaders are anticipating modest improvements in most subject areas. Leaders also presented evidence to indicate that pupils in Year 10 and below are making considerably quicker progress. Furthermore, their evidence indicates that disadvantaged pupils are making quicker progress, which is beginning to align with other pupils in the school and nationally. Despite this, leaders did indicate that pupils continue to make very weak progress in mathematics throughout the school. Furthermore, observations of teaching and scrutiny of pupils' work did not corroborate the improving picture shown in leaders' tracking information.

External support

Trust leaders have commissioned a broad and varied range of support for leaders at the school. However, the impact of this support is yet to be felt, because there were significant delays in procuring the funds necessary to pay for additional services. From January 2018, the school has greatly extended the scope of its work with CVTSA. All subject leaders are now being closely supported by specialist leaders of education. Middle leaders have nearly completed a middle leadership course that aims to improve their knowledge, skills and confidence as subject leaders. Middle leaders indicate that they feel revitalised by the support, direction and training they have received from colleagues from CVTSA. The leader of CVTSA is also working intensively with the principal and senior leaders to develop their leadership skills and support their efforts to improve the school. Senior leaders say that they value this support, and indicate that it is helping them to prioritise actions that are likely to have the biggest impact on improving teaching. The local authority is also supporting the school, particularly in relation to improving the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. The school is also due to start working with leaders from Woodchurch High School to develop leadership and further improve pupils' behaviour. The CEO has chosen to work with this school because it shares some common characteristics with the school, such as a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils. Staff from the University of Chester have also started to support teachers at the school. This reflects the importance that the new CEO attaches to close working

relationships between the university and school. This support has been focused on improving teaching in mathematics, science and humanities. However, it has not yet had any discernible impact on improving the quality of teaching in these areas. The breadth of this external support reflects the importance that leaders of the school and trust now attach to working in an open and collaborative manner with others. Despite this, the impact of this external support is yet to be felt because it is still in its early stages.