

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



24 April 2018

Mrs Samantha Williamson
Principal
Merchants' Academy
Gatehouse Avenue
Withywood
Bristol
BS13 9AJ

Dear Mrs Williamson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Merchants' Academy

Following my visit with Jeremy Law, Her Majesty's Inspector, Mary Massey, Ofsted Inspector, and David New, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 11–12 April 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 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 September 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 am of the opinion that the academy is recommended only to appoint newly qualified teachers to those departments which have the capacity to provide effective support.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing body, the chair of the

board of trustees, the acting chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Bristol. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Brackstone
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise standards of literacy and mathematics across all phases of the school.
- Improve leadership and management at all levels by ensuring that:
 - recent improvements to how senior and middle leaders and teachers are held to account are embedded across all parts of the school
 - assessment systems and practice enable teachers to accurately plan learning so that pupils achieve well and make good progress and guide them on how to improve
 - appropriate training is provided for teachers so that teaching improves rapidly
 - the key stage 4 curriculum meets the needs of all pupils.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment across all phases, including the sixth form, by:
 - raising expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - assessing accurately what pupils know, understand and can do and so target work that moves pupils onto the next steps in their learning
 - ensuring that teachers plan work that challenges pupils to think deeply and solve complex problems.
- Improve personal development by ensuring that:
 - pupils are better supported to develop respect and tolerance for those of different races and faiths
 - pupils are better informed about the dangers of extremism and radicalisation.
- Improve attendance across all year groups so that pupils attend more regularly and the number who are persistently absent falls rapidly.
- Rapidly improve leadership and provision in the early years so that children, particularly the most able, make strong progress from their starting points.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 11 April 2018 to 12 April 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, vice principals and assistant vice principals. They also met with the trust's head of school improvement. Inspectors met with a wide range of subject and phase leads and groups of teachers. They met with 10 governors, including the chair of the local governing body and the chair of the trust. Inspectors visited classrooms with senior leaders to observe pupils at work. They spoke to groups of pupils, both informally and formally. They also looked at a sample of their work.

Context

Since the inspection, the post-16 leader and the assistant vice principal for teaching and learning have both resigned. An interim assistant vice principal has been appointed and an existing leader has taken up the leadership of post-16 provision. The head of music has also left and been replaced by a new head of music and performance art. The special needs coordinator left and has been replaced by a new member of staff. Two English teachers left in October and have been replaced by two new members of staff. Following the recent resignation of the chief executive officer, the trust's head of school improvement has stepped into this role on a temporary basis.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Ably steered by a principal who has determination, vision and clarity of purpose, the journey of improvement is moving at a fast rate. The principal is instrumental in nurturing a sense of teamwork and a culture of respect. Staff report that morale has improved and there is a greater feeling of stability. The majority are enthusiastic about the changes which are being made to support them and the pupils they teach. In particular, they appreciate the wide range of training opportunities made available for them to have a deeper understanding of effective teaching and learning.

The principal is well supported by her senior leaders and governors, who share her clear sense of direction and ambition for the future success of the academy. There is now a greater clarity to senior leaders' roles and responsibilities. Vice principals are now contributing strongly to school improvement. They have high aspirations and are developing positive working partnerships with each other, and this is enhancing their professional expertise. This is a consistent feature across both the primary and secondary phases.

Leaders have made a very positive start to addressing the areas identified as needing improvement in the previous inspection. The improvement plan provides a

clear response to the areas for improvement. Planned actions are specific and success criteria are clear. The principal and her senior leaders communicate clear expectations to all other leaders and teachers.

The restructured local governing body has acted swiftly on the guidance they were given following a review of their roles. They have also made effective use of the training they have received. Governors are finding a better balance between supporting leaders and challenging them. They explain that they feel much better informed about the day-to-day life of the school. This is because the principal ensures that they have the information they need to ask robust questions. Many are also frequent visitors to the school, where they engage in its day-to-day work and interact with pupils across all age groups. Governors have a very realistic understanding of the performance of the school.

The establishment of a middle leadership structure across all key stages has created a strong mechanism for driving school improvement. Both subject and phase leaders of all key stages appreciate the professional development opportunities they have had to support their roles. High-quality external training, including expertise from the University of Bristol, is helping them to understand how to carry out their responsibilities confidently and effectively.

Most middle leaders now demonstrate a secure understanding of the performance of their pupils and the quality of teaching in their specific areas of responsibility. Middle leaders are developing their ability to create specific plans for individual subjects and phases which will have a positive impact on improving teaching and learning. The dedicated time they are given to visit lessons, look at pupils' books and analyse areas of strength and weaknesses is having a positive impact on teaching and learning.

Those middle leaders in the secondary phase, still in the early stages of developing their role, receive high-quality coaching and training. The new leader for post-16 provision has already had a positive impact on raising the expectations of students. The introduction of an accurate system which monitors the progress of these students is also ensuring that teachers have a better understanding of what they need to do to support them.

Since the establishment of a middle leadership structure in the primary phase, senior leaders now have a greater depth of knowledge about the quality of teaching. They know that there is much more consistency across the early years and key stages 1 and 2. In particular, the mathematics subject leader has championed an approach to ensure that pupils learn to think deeply about mathematical concepts and use a range of strategies to work out complex problems. The emphasis of a consistent and systematic approach to the teaching of phonics by middle leaders is ensuring that pupils grasp these skills and use them confidently to improve their reading and writing.

The new leader for the early years has wasted no time in improving provision for the youngest children. The strong emphasis on developing their communication, language and literacy skills is having an effective impact on the progress they are making in all areas of learning.

Throughout the school, senior leaders are making positive improvements to the way in which it monitors how well all its pupils are achieving. Externally moderated systems ensure that there is a consistency of approach. This provides up-to-date information on how well each year group is progressing, thus enabling leaders to analyse how different groups and individual pupils are making gains. Senior leaders are skilled in accessing information quickly and rigorously evaluating the outcomes. Middle leaders are developing these skills well and this is helping them to drive forward improvements within their specific areas. Teachers are becoming more skilled in assessing their pupils' work, and this is contributing to a more accurate picture of pupils' progress over time.

Leaders have wasted no time in reshaping the key stage 4 curriculum. Amendments have already been made to the curriculum for the current Year 11 pupils. This is enabling them to gain opportunities to not only strengthen their basic skills but also gain experience of vocational activities which will help them to seek employment in the future. Plans are in place to reintroduce a wide range of vocational courses for key stage 4 from September 2018. This will include courses on hair and beauty care, technical skills and construction work. This has been very positively received by Year 9, many of whom who have opted to take these vocational routes.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The principal and other senior leaders are giving teachers clear direction and guidance on how to make teaching more effective. Expectations have been raised and, as a consequence, improvements to the quality of teaching throughout the school is gathering momentum.

There are pockets of strong teaching in all phases of the school. Teaching and learning are effective when expectations are high and the work planned is interesting and engaging. Pupils learn best when they are taught by teachers who have strong subject knowledge and use questions well to deepen their understanding of what they are learning. In books, there is evidence of pupils benefiting from the feedback they receive from teachers. Pupils' confidence is built when teachers celebrate specific aspects of their work that they have done well. In particular, this is helping pupils react positively to suggestions made by their teachers on what they need to do to make their work even better.

Most teachers are now planning work that is tailored to meet pupils' needs. Using three levels of activities, 'stretch, challenge and super challenge', pupils are encouraged to do the very best they are capable of. This helps to challenge the most able pupils. Although it is a consistent feature in the primary phase, it is less

so in key stages 3 and 4 and post-16. The lack of challenge available for pupils is particularly evident in the science department.

Teaching in the early years has made substantial improvements. In particular, Nursery children are now taught the basic sounds of letters, and this is preparing them much better for their Reception year. Teaching staff also have a better understanding of their role in modelling the spoken word and by encouraging responses to be made in sentences. They demonstrate high expectations of the children. The early years leader has also improved the consistency of teaching phonics in Reception and in Year 1.

Phase leaders in key stages 1 and 2 have also taken effective steps to improve the curriculum and make it more meaningful for the pupils. Using quality literature as a stimulus for learning is helping pupils to be much more engaged in their learning. It is also broadening and extending their vocabulary. The emphasis on reading for pleasure is clearly demonstrated in all key stages, with the extensive investment in new books motivating the pupils. Storybooks are used well to kick-start a topic. For example, Year 5 pupils read about Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic to engage them in a new topic. The adventures of Roald Dahl's 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' provided a wealth of opportunities for Year 4 pupils to develop their literacy skills using different writing styles across a range of curriculum subjects. A visit to a well-known chocolate factory not only helped to consolidate their learning, but also provided them with a memorable experience.

Nevertheless, teaching remains variable. This is especially so in key stages 3 and 4 where there is some resistance to adhering to the systems introduced to improve teaching and accelerate pupils' learning. Senior leaders are fully aware that the teaching of science in key stages 3 and 4 is particularly weak. Valuable learning time is lost when teachers use it to undertake routine administrative tasks and fail to use the agreed feedback policy to help pupils identify their next steps in learning.

Although there is a greater emphasis on ensuring that all teachers promote pupils' literacy skills, it is still not a consistent feature of teaching and learning in key stages 3 and 4. At times, they are not given questions that require them to think deeply or opportunities to formulate their own opinions or ideas. This does not support their language development because they are not given sufficient opportunities to express themselves.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The new behaviour policy introduced at the start of the academic year is having a very positive effect on pupils' personal development. Pupils say that behaviour is much better and attribute this to the 'ready to learn' policy, which is clearly understood by them all. Key stage 3 pupils explain that they are 'learning more in lessons because we are not distracted by bad behaviour'. They are confident that the application of sanctions is consistently applied, and pupils sent to 'isolation'

recognise that they were given a clear warning first.

The conduct of pupils on both the primary and secondary sites during breaktimes and lunchtimes has improved significantly. Training primary lunchtime supervisors to play games with the pupils has been instrumental in improving the quality of behaviour on the playground. Pupils in all phases are calm and sociable and take breaktimes to chat with both friends and adults. They are polite and courteous. Pupils in key stages 3 and 4 and students in the post-16 provision conduct themselves well as they move between lessons. Leaders are visible around the school and reinforce the expectations of uniform. Pupils are respectful of the school environment.

The impact of improved behaviour is evident in lessons in the primary phase where all pupils are consistently engaged and fully focused on their learning. However, the impact of improved behaviour in the secondary phase on pupils' achievement in lessons is dependent on the approach of the teachers. Some have recognised that now they have the trust of their pupils, they can plan more independent and group work. In these sessions, such as history and food technology, pupils are engaged enthusiastically in their work with other pupils. They work collaboratively, eagerly and productively. However, this is not a consistent feature of the secondary teaching. Consequently, although not misbehaving, pupils are disengaged in their learning and become passive.

At the time of the previous inspection, it was noted that pupils were not always respectful and tolerant of those of different faiths and needed to be better informed about the dangers of extremism and radicalism. In particular, racist incidents in the primary school were prevalent. This is no longer the case, with none being recorded since the previous inspection. Pupils report that they are respectful to each other and tolerant of those who have different beliefs to their own.

Primary phase leaders have ensured that their pupils are clear about the dangers of extremism and radicalisation. Nevertheless, in the secondary phase there is a recognition that there is a need to develop a more consistent approach to the teaching of personal, social and emotional education. This is in the process of being planned for the next academic year.

Attendance remains a considerable focus for the school. Leaders have put in place more strategies to improve attendance. The 'fiver project' encourages pupils to attend school regularly because money is accrued for those classes where attendance is high. The declining attendance rates have been successfully halted. Although still well below average, there has been a slight improvement in attendance and a sharp decline in persistent absenteeism.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' achievement is improving across the school. Current children in the early years have responded well to the improved provision and are making strong progress in all areas of learning. This is reflected in their progress information, which is collated regularly by the early years teaching staff. It indicates that the proportion of children who have already reached a good level of development in Reception is higher than at the end of the previous academic year. At the time of the previous inspection, it was noted that boys in the early years did not progress as well as girls. This has been successfully addressed, with boys accelerating their progress and now outperforming girls.

Improvements to the teaching of phonics have also had a strong impact on raising standards in the current Year 1 class. Pupils confidently recognise word patterns and use their phonics skills well to work out unknown words. Current pupils in Years 2 to 6 are making effective progress because they are interested in their learning and are taught well. The way in which mathematics is taught ensures that pupils regularly recap on key skills and are encouraged to use them to solve a range of different problems.

Although the improving attitudes of pupils and more regular attendance are helping to accelerate progress in key stages 3 and 4 and in the post-16 provision, it is much more variable. The variability is particularly noticeable across the different subjects and departments.

Pupils are catching up with missed learning from previous years and a legacy of poor teaching. For example, current Year 11 pupils are having intensive support, particularly in literacy and mathematics, to help them to accelerate progress and rectify the gaps in their knowledge prior to taking their GCSEs. Weak literacy skills remain a barrier to learning in some subjects. Although some teachers are actively addressing this, leaders know that there is still a way to go to ensure that all pupils have the opportunities to develop their literacy skills across all subjects. In science, pupils are working at a much lower standard than expected for their age.

The difference between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others across the school is gradually diminishing. This is a result of clearer assessment procedures and improvements made to the way in which the pupil premium funding is used to support these pupils.

The progress of those pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities is also improving at a steady rate. This is because accurate assessment information is provided to the teachers and used to plan to meet the needs of individual SEN pupils.

External support

School leaders are working closely with other leaders within the trust. Network meetings, joint training sessions and visits to other schools have been helpful because they have provided staff with ideas and confidence.

The school receives effective support from the trust's head of improvement. This support consists of training, mentoring and quality assurance. Middle leaders have appreciated the external training they have received to help them develop their role. The University of Bristol provides bespoke training to leaders and has also provided specialist support to develop the effectiveness of the post-16 provision.

A representative of the regional schools commissioner regularly visits the school to review the progress that it is making. Reviews to date have been positive.