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Mr Jonathan Harris
Principal
Thomas Middlecott Academy
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Dear Mr Harris

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Thomas Middlecott Academy

Following my visit to your school on 26 June 2018, 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 September 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I held meetings with you, senior and middle leaders, a group of teachers and the coordinator for the provision for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. I also met with the chair of the academy improvement board and the trust representative, who is the school's improvement lead. I spoke formally with a group of pupils from Year 9 and Year 10 to discuss their learning and their experiences at the school. I also spoke informally with some pupils during breaktime. I observed, jointly with senior leaders, teaching in a range of classes and subjects.

I scrutinised documents, including the school's information about current pupils' progress, a sample of pupils' work, pupils' behaviour and attendance records, and senior leaders' evaluations of the school's work. I analysed recent minutes of meetings of the academy improvement board. I also checked the school's single central record and the system for recruiting staff. The trust's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the previous inspection, a temporary assistant principal has joined the senior leadership team. As a result, roles within the senior leadership team have been reorganised so that there are clearer lines of responsibility and accountability. A new coordinator for the provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities was appointed in January 2018. The attendance team has been strengthened with the appointment of an additional member of staff.

Since the start of the academic year, 13 teachers have left the school. Currently, nearly one quarter of all teaching staff are temporary appointments or unqualified teachers.

Following a review of governance in the autumn term, the academy improvement board is about to be dissolved. A local governing body will replace it in September 2018 and will include, among others, members of the school's staff, and parents and carers.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You have established a new vision and culture for the school with an emphasis on creating 'a community of ambitious, caring and resilient learners'. You are determined to provide pupils with a high-quality education. In response to the findings of the previous inspection report, you focused swiftly on securing the best possible teachers for the school. This has been a considerable challenge. You have found it difficult to secure specialist teachers in some subject areas, notably science. Due to inconsistencies in staffing, there are still subject areas where teaching is weak. In these instances, pupils say that they receive less help with their learning.

You have aligned your school improvement plan closely, although not exclusively, with the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report. You review the plan regularly so that procedures for monitoring and measuring success are precise. So far, a majority of actions on your plan are well under way. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the current areas for improvement and are addressing these systematically. They check on the quality and impact of these strategies thoroughly, to ensure that they are having a positive impact on improving pupils' outcomes.

Senior leaders have continued to build the capacity of subject leaders. Three subject leaders have received training from Ambition School Leadership. The trust has provided effective leadership support for English, mathematics and science through its subject leaders, as well as facilitating stronger subject links with other trust academies to share resources and ideas. Senior leaders are taking a more collaborative approach to working with subject leaders, providing coaching and instigating support plans for those who need to improve their practice. They understand the important role they have to play in improving the quality of teaching

in their subject areas, and also the importance of improving pupils' outcomes. Through a detailed programme of lesson observations and scrutiny of books, subject leaders are becoming increasingly skilled at holding their teams to account. However, this is not yet consistent across all subject areas.

You and senior leaders have a much sharper focus on increasing the impact of additional funding on pupils' progress. For example, senior leaders are much more rigorous in holding subject leaders to account for disadvantaged pupils' outcomes through progress meetings. Teachers are now aware of these particular pupils and prioritise their learning needs. Disadvantaged pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 benefit from extra support with reading and mathematics and make good progress. They also receive additional careers guidance when making their GCSE subject choices. Leaders are yet to evaluate these initiatives. However, the school's information on current Year 11 disadvantaged pupils' outcomes shows much faster progress compared with 2017. The attainment gap between the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is beginning to reduce.

Leaders do not track additional funding for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities precisely. You have recently appointed a new coordinator for the provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. You have also strengthened the team of staff working to ensure that the needs of these pupils are met. Although leaders have now accurately identified these pupils and are monitoring their progress more closely, teachers are not supporting them sufficiently in class. Strategies to help them make better progress are not yet in place.

The chair of the academy improvement board has a clear focus on supporting senior leaders. Members of the board have a precise understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and the challenges it still faces. They are skilled in challenging senior leaders about the performance of the school, in relation to, for example, pupils' outcomes, attendance and behaviour.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment at the school

Staff are aware of the school's teaching and learning priorities and their roles and responsibilities in bringing about improvements. Leaders provide teachers with much more reliable information on pupils' progress and teachers use this information to inform their planning with increasing success. They are able to remedy any underperformance more promptly. When a pupil enters the school part-way through a year, teachers set them appropriately challenging targets, which they then modify as they get to know the pupil's abilities better. Teachers also take advantage of opportunities to moderate pupils' work with other colleagues within the trust. This gives them confidence in their assessment of pupils' attainment and what they need to do to improve further.

Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are rising. Leaders are very clear that learning should be enjoyable, engaging and challenging for all pupils. Teachers

are beginning to share common expectations of pupils and help them to follow established routines. For example, the 'do now' activity ensures that lessons begin crisply and pupils say that they find the activity a helpful focus. Some teachers use questioning to deepen pupils' understanding and extend their thinking effectively. For example, Year 10 pupils were encouraged to analyse the complexities of a previously unseen poem through skilful questioning by the teacher.

Senior leaders have provided a programme of training for staff to support whole-school priorities. This includes additional support for staff who need it, for example in science. You have organised staff visits to other providers and opportunities for sharing good practice have grown. Each week, teachers work together in small groups to focus on a different aspect of teaching and learning. While leaders have not yet evaluated this work, teachers say that it has given them the confidence to take more risks in their teaching and challenge pupils more frequently.

The overall quality of teaching is beginning to improve. Pupils who spoke with inspectors were very positive about the changes that have taken place to support their learning. They said that they enjoy activities that allow them to engage with their peers more frequently, as they say that this increases their confidence. However, they also recognise that when they do not have a permanent teacher, they receive less help with their learning and make slower progress. The school's information on the progress of current Year 11 pupils indicates that senior leaders' actions are beginning to have a positive impact, with improvements in pupils' progress overall. Nevertheless, leaders acknowledge that there is still some inadequate teaching, and that to improve the quality of teaching further, they must ensure that there is consistency across the school so that pupils consistently make good or better progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare at the school

Leaders' work to improve pupils' attendance and reduce their persistent absence is paying off. A team of staff works closely with parents, particularly those who speak English as an additional language, to engage them effectively in improving their children's attendance. This approach is proving successful. In comparison with last year, pupils' absence and their persistent absence have much reduced. Attendance remains a high profile for the school, with the pupils responding positively to rewards for those whose attendance is consistently high.

Staff and pupils agree that pupils' behaviour has continued to improve since the last inspection. The proportion of pupils who are excluded has dropped. Leaders track pupils who display persistently poor behaviour closely and provide them with additional support. For example, work to reduce the proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities who are excluded has had a positive impact, with personal support plans in place for those who require them. Frequent daily visits by pastoral leaders to lessons ensure that most pupils are ready to learn. However, leaders recognise that some poor behaviour still stems from poor-quality teaching. Teachers

are more likely to remove particular groups of pupils from lessons for poor behaviour, for example, pupils who speak English as an additional language.

Pupils welcome the behaviour system and appreciate the rewards. However, some believe that not all staff apply the 'yellow card' system consistently. Pupils carry 'expectation cards', outlining the 10 things they require to be an excellent pupil. They are generally polite and courteous to each other and to adults. During social times, there is a positive atmosphere and pupils talk happily to visitors about their experience of school and their aspirations. Pupils' attitudes to learning have improved and, with increasing confidence, they readily reflect on their studies and the positive contributions they can make.

Pupils say that they feel safe, happy and secure in the school. Safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements and are effective. Recent changes made by leaders ensure that recruitment checks on the suitability of staff and volunteers to work with children are now thorough and accurately recorded.

Support

The David Ross Education Trust, the school's sponsor, has provided some effective assistance since the inspection in September 2017. An assistant principal employed by the trust has been in post since January, introducing new approaches to teaching and learning and strategies to improve disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. Subject specialists in English, mathematics and science have helped school leaders to develop new schemes of work and resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The English and mathematics specialists each taught a Year 11 class from January until May and provided individual support for pupils.

Support from the trust has not been sustained since the school's last inspection. For example, it is unclear whether the four staff brought into the school in January will continue to support the school after this academic year. The trust has not yet helped school leaders to secure permanent, high-calibre staff in all subject areas or met the terms of its own action plan in order to raise pupils' outcomes.

Teachers across the trust have worked together closely to prepare for the introduction of the trust-wide common curriculum in September 2018; this has been particularly valuable for small departments. However, senior leaders are concerned that standardising the curriculum across all 11 of the trust's secondary academies will not allow the needs of the pupils in this school to be met successfully.

You discuss the school's improvement plan during 'team around the school' meetings with trust leaders. However, the school's improvement lead has changed a number of times over the last year, resulting in inconsistent support.

You have sought and gained support from other organisations. You are in the early stages of being part of the Transforming Schools Partnership, having been invited

by the Department for Education. You have skilfully used your link with Ambition School Leadership to secure additional training for a small number of subject leaders. You have also recently agreed to work more closely with other secondary schools in Boston, facilitated by the local authority.

After the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

Due to significant changes to the school's senior leadership that are due to take place in September 2018, it is likely that the school will receive a further monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Lincolnshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Tordoff

Her Majesty's Inspector