

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs 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 Lois Kelly and Peter Bassett, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 26–27 June 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 fourth 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 26 June 2018 to 27 June 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, other leaders and members of staff and two groups of pupils. The lead inspector spoke by telephone to the chair of the interim advisory board (IAB) and to the chief executive of the Education Central Multi-Academy Trust (ECMAT). Inspectors met the chief executive of the new sponsor, Q3 Multi-Academies Trust (MAT) and the newly appointed principal designate. Inspectors conducted learning walks and lesson observations with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors took account of the 15 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and two letters from parents. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents and policies relating to behaviour, safeguarding, teaching and learning and outcomes for pupils.

Context

The interim headteacher, appointed in January 2018, is continuing in her role until the end of the summer term. A new sponsor, Q3 MAT, has been appointed and will take up its responsibility for the school from 1 September 2018. The new sponsor has appointed a substantive principal who will take up her post, also on 1 September. The ongoing financial notice to improve imposed by the current trust ECMAT remains. About 25% of the current staff are on short-term cover contracts, although at present there are only four teaching vacancies for September 2018. Two of these are in modern foreign languages. The school's attendance officer left during the summer term.

Plans have been put in place to reshape the curriculum from September 2018. However, a three-year key stage 4 curriculum starting in Year 9 will remain unchanged. From September, the school's key stage 3 'solace' curriculum (the school's integrated combined subjects course designed to facilitate transition from key stage 2) will no longer exist and pupils in Years 7 and 8 will now study a modern foreign language and performing arts subjects. The newly shaped curriculum is intended to generate savings in staffing.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

You have continued to provide stability and continuity for the school during a time of turbulence and change. The financial constraints imposed by ECMAT and the fact that a new sponsor is taking on the school under new leadership, means that you have been unable to put in place the long-term changes required. You are working effectively with Q3 MAT and the new principal in shaping the changes that will be introduced next term. You and the senior leaders have a realistic view of where the school is and have accurately identified areas where it is not yet good enough.

The curriculum changes proposed for September will come too late for current pupils in Year 8. At present, only the top sets in Years 7 and 8 study a modern foreign language and not all pupils are studying performing arts. Older pupils, now in key stage 4, who followed the school's 'solace' curriculum have missed out on a solid grounding in key stage 3 in subjects such as geography, history and modern foreign languages. As a consequence, these pupils continue to struggle with the increased demand of the new GCSE courses.

Leaders and other staff have worked hard for pupils currently in Year 11 in order to reduce the gap with national expectations although pupil outcomes are still not high enough. For these pupils who have experienced weak teaching over many years there is much ground to catch up on. Leaders are confident that current outcomes are at least in line with last year's cohort, albeit which were very low.

Leaders have deployed the school's strongest teaching in key stage 4. Cover staff and weaker teaching disproportionately affect current pupils in Years 7 and 8.

Although improving, assessment information on pupils' outcomes is not fully reliable. Leaders are confident, based on greater moderation and increased exam-condition assessments, that their predictions for GCSE in 2018 are more accurate than the previous year.

The 'flightpath' system of setting pupil targets based on key stage 2 outcomes is still in place. As a result of weak assessment practices, targets set for pupils have not been realistic or motivating and in particular the overuse of a standardised reading test has failed to improve significantly pupils' reading ages.

Leaders have conducted more accurate assessments on the fluency of pupils learning English as an additional language. A summer school has been planned for those at the earliest competency stages.

The school now has a pupil premium strategy for proposed spending of additional funding in this academic year which is published on its website. However, there are restraints placed by the financial notice to improve on what resources the school can buy.

The school does not have a proposed spending strategy for Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up funding for 2017/18 published on its website and this money is not being targeted strategically enough. Similarly, there are gaps in spending for support for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, other than those with education, health and care plans or statements of special educational needs. Consequently, the school is not sufficiently using additional funding to improve outcomes for those groups who need to catch up, including pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, boys and disadvantaged pupils.

You, supported by the senior leaders, have increased parental engagement through

a parent forum and parents' days linked to examination results. There have been no parental complaints about the school to Ofsted since the last monitoring visit. Conversely, you have received appreciative letters from parents about your approach to safeguarding. The proportion of parents responding to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, who said that they would recommend the school to another parent has risen and is now a majority. However, this is based on a very small number of responses. Leaders' work to engage parents is still at an early stage.

Following the last monitoring visit, the members of the IAB have started to engage more regularly with leaders and now meet monthly as a governing body. There is now regular communication between the chair and interim headteacher including face-to-face meetings. Governors have now met their statutory responsibility to appoint a link governor for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. The link governors for special educational needs and safeguarding now meet regularly with school leaders.

However, the extent to which the IAB holds leaders to account for the school's action plan is limited. The plan lacks a column for evaluation. As a result, leaders highlight the actions they have carried out without demonstrating the impact of these actions on pupils' outcomes. For example, school attendance is still falling yet actions to address this decline have been highlighted on the action plan in green or yellow as completed or nearly completed.

You and the senior leaders have continued to ensure that pupils are kept safe and well looked after by maintaining the school's strong culture of safeguarding. Staff know what to do if any potential incident arises and are familiar with systems for reporting and recording incidents. Leaders are well trained to fulfil their responsibilities.

Governors make regular checks to ensure that the school meets its safeguarding requirements. Some younger pupils said they still did not feel safe. However, older ones said there was now a much safer environment and that they feel safe in school. The majority of the small number of parents responding to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their children are kept safe at school.

Tutor time at the end of the school day is not used effectively by tutors and it is not valued by pupils. Few tutor groups seen during the visit showed any evidence that pupils were engaged in the activity they were supposed to be doing.

The ECMAT trust has stepped back from its engagement with the school, other than on financial and human resource issues.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Where leaders have supported substantive teachers through individual support plans this has led to improvements in teaching. There is now a weekly sharing of best practice by teachers. However, because of the high number of cover posts where there are vacancies, or split classes with two or more different teachers it is difficult to bring about secure improvements.

Behaviour in lessons and relationships between teachers, additional adults and pupils have continued to improve since the last monitoring visit. Classrooms are, for the most part, orderly environments, which means that poor behaviour is not a barrier to learning. Inspectors saw little sign of the behaviour policy needing to be implemented. For the most part it was not necessary but in some instances where it was, it was not implemented quickly enough. For example, when a pupil stops working this is not challenged consistently enough by teachers or additional adults. Where teachers make comments in pupils' books about the lack of work this is not followed up consistently. As a result, in subjects such as English and science, for example, pupils are not stretched and challenged to do as well as they could.

Inspection evidence from joint observations with senior leaders of English lessons showed that, while there is a structure in the planning and an imaginative choice of texts, teaching is not effective. This is because pupils too often lack the vocabulary and cultural references beyond their experience to understand the texts used.

The extent to which work is set at the right level of challenge for pupils' different starting points is still at an early level of development. In English, for example, pupils in different sets were reading the same text with the same activity regardless of the variability in their reading ages. In some instances, the reading age of the text was far higher than that of any pupils in the class. Where reading ages are not recorded or where pupils have inappropriate targets, teachers do not have reliable assessment information to set work at the right level of challenge. Additional adults deployed in some lessons were not consistently using their time productively to support pupils' learning.

Pupils spoken to by inspectors wanted lessons to be more interactive and would welcome a wider diversity of trips. Trips organised by the school were mainly in the immediate locality, such as Blackheath, Oldbury, Stafford and Wolverhampton. Pupils said they do not find many lessons engaging and are often not sufficiently motivated to complete their classwork or homework. Few spoken to had been to London.

There are strengths in the teaching of art and food where pupils were engaged effectively in their learning. In lessons visited by inspectors, pupils were seen responding well to learning by discovery. Leaders also judge teaching of physical education (PE) to be mostly strong, although PE was not observed on this visit. Pupils seen in Year 7 'solace' classes were also engaged. Those pupils spoken to in Year 7 were positive about the transition from primary to secondary but those

spoken to in Year 8 were less convinced, as they felt the school's 'solace' curriculum did not prepare them well for key stage 4.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

You have continued to maintain the calm, orderly environment that exists around much of the school and in most lessons. There is much less litter on the ground, which has improved the appearance of the school. Pupils spoken to by inspectors were polite and courteous. However, their attitudes in lessons are characteristically more compliant and passive rather than enthusiastic and eager.

The number of fixed exclusions has fallen by half compared to a similar period in the last academic year. The number of permanent exclusions is also down. There has also been a reduction in the number of pupils in the alternative provision on site as more pupils have been successfully reintegrated into lessons.

Parents responding to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, are not as convinced as the pupils that behaviour has improved. Less than half of the very small number who responded agreed that the school manages behaviour well.

Leaders have not improved school attendance, which continues on a three-year declining trend. Pupils spoken to, especially younger ones, were excited and enthusiastic about the school's new name and new uniform to be introduced from next term.

Outcomes for pupils

The school's assessment information indicates that progress for pupils in Years 7 and 8 is not good enough. Inspection evidence shows that progress in key stage 3 has been impeded by factors including a disproportionately high number of cover teachers and weaker teaching compared to key stage 4 and the reduced time available for other subjects because of the dominance of the 'solace' curriculum.

Pupils are not making enough progress in Year 9. In Years 10 and 11 there are greater rates of progress but not sufficient to make up for the previous lost years of inadequate progress. In English, leaders' evaluation shows pupils have not made the progress they should have made from their starting points at the end of key stage 2 in any year group or class.

Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils and boys are not making enough progress to diminish the difference with other pupils nationally.

External support

The school continues to receive little external support or challenge. However, leaders are engaged well with a local outstanding school for the development of teaching and learning.

Leaders have welcomed the engagement of the new sponsor during the summer term ahead of its taking on the school in September 2018. Heads of department have started to work closely with lead practitioners from the new trust but it is too early to evaluate the impact of this.