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Mrs Jenny Langley
Principal
Great Academy Ashton
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Dear Mrs Langley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Great Academy Ashton

Following my visit with David Roberts, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 26–27 September 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 February 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

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

Yours sincerely

Helen O’Neill
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve pupils' progress in core subjects, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, by:
 - using information about pupils' abilities to plan suitable learning
 - making learning engaging
 - using questioning to better challenge the most able pupils.
- Improve the quality of teaching and in turn reduce incidents of poor behaviour and reduce truancy by:
 - using information about pupils' abilities to plan suitable learning
 - ensuring that behaviour is managed fairly, consistently and proportionately
 - establishing a positive, supportive and rewarding climate for learning.
- Improve behaviour, safety and the personal development and welfare of pupils by:
 - ensuring that all staff receive child protection training
 - increasing the numbers of staff on duty at social times and the end of the school day
 - reducing racist, homophobic and other derogatory language around the school
 - ensuring that internal and external exclusions lead to improvements in behaviour.
- Improve the 16 to 19 study programmes by:
 - ensuring that almost all pupils who start Year 12 complete Year 13
 - improving the quality of teaching to improve progress
 - evaluating rigorously the current quality of provision
 - creating a coherent plan for improvement.
- Immediately improve the quality of leadership by:
 - strengthening the process of self-evaluation
 - rigorously evaluating the impact of new initiatives, including by taking into account the views of pupils, parents and teachers
 - holding leaders at all levels accountable for the standards that pupils achieve.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 26 September 2018 to 27 September 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and a range of staff. Inspectors also met with teaching-and-learning consultants and the chief executive of the multi-academy trust. In addition, inspectors held formal and informal discussions with a range of pupils from across both key stages. Inspectors also considered the views of parents and carers through Ofsted's online survey, Parent View.

Inspectors carried out observations of learning and looked at pupils' work. Some of these activities were undertaken jointly with senior leaders and consultants from the trust. Inspectors also observed pupils during lessons and social times and when moving to and from lessons. As part of the inspection, inspectors also considered information provided by the school relating to outcomes, school improvement, attendance, behaviour and documentation relating to teaching and learning.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, several staff, including senior and middle leaders, have left the school. Leaders and governors have appointed a number of new teachers. Staffing is stabilising across the school but there are still several vacancies which are yet to be filled, two of which are in mathematics. The headteacher, trust and interim executive board have undertaken a full restructuring of the leadership team.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The improvements seen during the last monitoring visit continue. The headteacher ensures that all improvements are sustainable and become embedded firmly into school life. None of these improvements has been easy to achieve. Each improvement becomes part of the new way of working at Great Academy Ashton.

With the support of the trust and the interim executive board, the headteacher has undertaken a root-and-branch restructuring of leadership, including senior and middle leadership roles. Roles and responsibilities have been redesigned and streamlined. A new leadership and staffing structure is now in place. These very recent changes have already had some impact, as can be seen in the way middle leaders are now involved in appraisal, improvement planning and assuring the quality of teaching, learning and outcomes in their respective faculties. Collectively, staff are positive about recent changes across all aspects of the school's work. They say that expectations and levels of accountability are high, but they welcome the transparency and clarity that the headteacher's strong leadership brings.

The quality of middle leadership continues to improve. Heads of faculty are more

skilled in analysing the outcomes achieved by pupils and in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. Faculty improvement plans are thorough and identify the key priorities which will enable leaders to continue to carry out improvements at a rapid pace. However, some leaders are not able to analyse clearly the impact of their strategies.

Together with the trust's teaching-and-learning team, the headteacher has raised the expectations of staff and pupils. Staff feel inspired to continue to improve teaching, learning and assessment. They feel trusted to take risks and innovate in the classroom. Staff are aware that the ultimate responsibility and onus is on them to provide effective learning for pupils through a regular diet of high-quality teaching. This aim is being realised increasingly across the school but there are still pockets of weak teaching. The stability of teaching is adversely affected by the number of short-term teachers the school currently uses, particularly in mathematics.

Without any doubt, leaders' efforts and actions have brought about noticeable differences to all areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. Leaders are unrelenting in their focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and their belief that this is the key factor which underpins providing a good education for pupils. Attendance and punctuality are improving. The work to improve behaviour has transformed the atmosphere and relationships in lessons and around the school.

Leaders are accurate and honest in their evaluation of what has been accomplished and what still remains to be done. They acknowledge that there has been significant movement towards addressing the issues identified in the previous inspection but that key priorities remain. They know that disadvantaged pupils and middle-ability pupils in Year 11 did not achieve as well as they could. Leaders also acknowledge that variations in the quality of teaching and learning still persist.

Overall, the headteacher has led considerable structural and procedural changes in the past two terms. As a result, staff morale and confidence are high. Relationships with parents are more positive. Parents' responses to Ofsted's survey, Parent View, have been more positive in all measures, particularly those relating to their children's happiness at school and how well the school is led and managed. A rapidly growing proportion of parents are now happy to recommend the school to others.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching and learning continues to improve. Teaching over time in art, creative subjects and physical education is inspiring pupils to work hard and participate fully in lessons. Teaching in other subjects such as mathematics is improving, but less rapidly.

The headteacher has refocused staff and pupils on the purpose of learning. Pupils are encouraged to appreciate the links between 'enterprise, professionalism and employment' and their learning. As a result, they can understand how their learning

is purposeful and relevant to their futures. This strategy is proving successful in the main, but the engagement of pupils is still low when teaching is not tailored to meet their needs.

Pupils now follow well-established routines upon entering the classroom, and as a result little learning time is lost at the beginning of lessons. This has improved considerably since the previous monitoring visit. Pupils state that teaching is improving, but acknowledge that consistency across subjects has not been achieved.

Pupils learn well and are engaged in their learning when teachers' accurate planning means that work is well matched to their needs and abilities. Teachers' strong subject knowledge, such as in science, instils a confidence in pupils and creates a purposeful atmosphere where pupils listen carefully to staff and work well, showing gains in their knowledge and understanding. From work seen in books and in lessons, when subject-specific terminology is used precisely and teachers model criteria for success clearly, progress is strong. Pupils respond positively to engaging and inspiring teaching. Relationships are good and pupils progress well over time in these classes.

When learning falters, pupils disengage and low-level disruption can take place. This occurs when teaching is lacklustre and does not stretch and challenge pupils adequately. However, this variation in quality is decreasing as standards of teaching improve.

Leaders recognise that to improve the quality of teaching further, information about pupils' abilities and prior attainment needs to be used consistently to inform planning. The majority of teachers are sequencing learning well and make clear links from prior learning to new learning. Leaders acknowledge that some staff are still not skilled enough in asking challenging questions of pupils which require them to grapple with concepts and show a deep understanding.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The improvement in behaviour around the school and in lessons is considerable. During the monitoring visit, inspectors observed pupils conducting themselves well throughout the school day. During lesson changeovers and when moving around the school, pupils walk safely to lessons without much guidance from adults. Behaviour at social times has improved. Pupils are respectful of each other and speak to each other appropriately. Very little derogatory language was heard around the school. However, some younger pupils can be boisterous if not closely supervised.

The positive atmosphere and strong relationships are evident in an improved climate for learning. The persistence of leaders and staff in their high expectations of pupils' behaviour has meant that the majority of pupils are now striving to reach these new high standards. Internal truancy has almost been eradicated as pupils now enjoy their learning more and realise that their actions will have consequences.

Pupils and staff are positive about the improvements seen in behaviour as teachers are once again beginning to enjoy teaching and pupils are re-engaging with their learning. This positive shift in atmosphere and climate for learning is evident in the significantly reduced number of fixed-term exclusions. The full impact can also be seen in the dramatic fall in the number of pupils who are internally excluded. Leaders no longer need to operate an 'on-call' system.

The diligent and committed approach to improving attendance and punctuality is beginning to have a positive effect. Pupils are attending more regularly and are less frequently persistently absent from school. Leaders know that these green shoots of improvement need to continue apace, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Some pupils and families are still hard to reach, but leaders do not give up. Leaders and staff work very hard to support families and pupils. Leaders work closely with other agencies to ensure that pupils are in school more regularly so that they can learn and make better progress.

Opportunities for pupils to take on responsibility continue to develop. They have many positions of responsibility, from being 'upstanders' to peer mediators and learning leaders. Pupils feel safe in school and are knowledgeable about how to keep themselves safe in school, online and in the wider community. When they make poor decisions or have concerns, they know that there are adults in school who they can go to and trust that they will receive appropriate and timely support and guidance. Pupils feel listened to and are truly appreciative of the extra-curricular clubs and visits that staff make available for them.

Outcomes for pupils

Provisional outcomes for Year 11 pupils suggest improvements in a number of areas. The school's information shows that pupils on average gained over a quarter of a grade higher across their GCSE subjects than in 2017. This represents a positive, improving picture in a range of measures and subjects.

Attainment has improved overall, and the proportion of pupils achieving the highest grades in mathematics has risen considerably. This is a direct result of targeted intervention and support for able pupils in mathematics. While the results of high-attaining pupils show a more positive picture, this masks the lack of improvement for middle-ability pupils and high-ability disadvantaged pupils. The progress of disadvantaged pupils continues to be a concern across a range of subjects as they are still attaining less well than their peers, both in school and nationally.

Some areas of weakness in outcomes persist. Pupils' performance in English literature and some optional subjects was a cause for concern. Leaders have rightly celebrated the results pupils achieved in chemistry, physics, biology, French, art and religious education. Pupils also achieved well in performing arts, sport and catering.

Poor curriculum design has contributed to the underachievement of those pupils who did not gain a suite of qualifications which prepared them well for the next

stage in their education or training. Curriculum changes to address these issues now make sure that pupils study a range of subjects which will enable them to make better progress and achieve more highly in line with their capabilities. Despite improvements in many areas, leaders acknowledge that outcomes need to improve in English literature, history and product design.

Progress is stronger for current key stage 4 pupils than it is for those in key stage 3. Younger pupils are confident orally and most can clearly explain their answers, but are more reluctant to produce extended writing and detailed explanations. Leaders and teachers are focused on improving the stamina and confidence of younger pupils in writing so that they can more accurately transfer their knowledge and understanding to the written form.

External support

The chief executive of the trust and interim executive board (IEB) hold the headteacher and other school leaders strictly to account for the quality and pace of improvement. The internal support provided by the trust and IEB has been considerable and of good quality. As a result, the school has not used any external support.