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5 November 2018

Ms Samantha Williamson
Principal
Merchants' Academy
Gatehouse Avenue
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Dear Ms Williamson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Merchants' Academy

Following my visit with Ross Newman and Judith Mee, Ofsted Inspectors to your school on 17 to 18 October 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in September 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.

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 board of trustees and the 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

Iain Freeland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- 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 second monitoring inspection on 17 to 18 October 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, the head of primary, senior and middle leaders. Discussions also took place with the interim chief executive officer (CEO) of Venturers Trust, the trust's head of academy improvement and two members of the governing body, one of whom is also a trustee.

Inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke with groups of pupils. One inspector spoke with parents and carers of primary-aged children at the start of the school day.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the number of pupils on the school's roll has increased slightly. There are now over 1,100 pupils on roll. Over 20 teachers left at the end of the summer term and most have been replaced. The head of the primary phase and the assistant vice-principal for science took up their posts in September 2018. An interim assistant vice-principal responsible for English has been appointed to cover for the autumn term until the substantive member of staff takes up this post in January 2019. The governing body has remained stable. The trust has appointed a CEO who took up post at the start of the autumn term and is providing support to the school. The trust's head of academy improvement continues to work with colleagues in the primary phase.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have forged a staff team who are united in the drive to improve outcomes for pupils across the school. Staff have embraced many of the changes that leaders have introduced, and the progress pupils make is rising. However, progress remains well below the national average.

Leaders and the interim CEO are acutely aware of the scale of the work that remains to be done. However, the progress made to implement the improvements required to date has not been rapid enough.

Those responsible for governance recognise that there has been some progress in the school and realise that there is still significantly more to be done. A lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of trustees, governors, trust leaders and school leaders has not ensured that the journey of school improvement has been quick enough. However, this term, governors have placed a sharper focus on the quality of teaching and learning in their work.

Leaders are accurate in their assessment of the quality of teaching and learning,

recognising that there is still much inconsistency between and within year groups in the primary phase and across subjects in the secondary phase. However, they are continuing to work with colleagues to improve the teaching and learning further.

The school has experienced further turbulence as a result of necessary staffing changes at senior and middle leadership levels. The appointment of a new head of the primary phase has kick-started further improvements, for example in improved attitudes to learning and behaviour.

In the secondary phase, further changes to subject leadership have led to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning within and across subjects. Many subject leaders are new to the school since the previous monitoring inspection. Those who have been in post for longer have benefited from some training and coaching. However, they are still not holding staff in their subject areas sufficiently to account for the quality of teaching and learning. Middle leaders in the secondary phase can detail clearly what they have done but their evaluation of the impact lacks precision. As a result, too often, the rate of progress pupils make depends on the teacher of the group. In contrast, systems to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are being implemented consistently in the primary phase and teachers are being held to account. Consequently, the improvements in the teaching of reading and mathematics have been significant.

Leaders have organised training for staff to support their professional development. However, this training is not yet having the impact required to bring about the improvements needed.

Senior leaders and some middle leaders have visited other schools in the multi-academy trust, locally and those that have been recognised for their strong practice in specific aspects. The principal benefits from support from the interim CEO and the CEO of a neighbouring trust. This is helping her to think critically and prioritise the key aspects of the school's work that require further significant improvement. Some staff are completing postgraduate courses in education and a few middle leaders are completing training that is pertinent to their role. This training is supporting staff to improve their practice. Primary staff have been well inducted to the school's approach to teaching phonics and mathematics. This is resulting in a consistent approach and improved outcomes in these areas. Leaders recognise that they need to support colleagues to develop their teaching further so that it meets pupils' needs more precisely and deepens their understanding in the subjects they learn.

Leaders have not yet been successful in ensuring that the new assessment and feedback policy is being applied consistently. Pupils are not clear about the school's target-setting procedures and older pupils comment that they do not understand the requirements of the different grades at GCSE in a wide range of subjects. In some classes, pupils are not clear about what they need to do to improve. Consequently, progress is not as rapid as it needs to be to compensate for the slow

progress in the past.

The review of the school's curriculum is at different stages. In Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form, leaders have reformed the curriculum. A wider range of subjects and different types of courses now meet pupils' needs and career aspirations much more closely. The reform of the curriculum in key stage 3 is following a phased rollout, with the first phase starting in September 2018. This has allowed leaders and teachers to think carefully about what pupils should know and understand by the end of each year. Curriculum plans have been mapped through to the end of Year 11 to ensure that pupils acquire knowledge and skills progressively. Work on the wider curriculum in the primary phase is due to start in November 2018.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teachers' assessments are increasingly accurate. Leaders' actions to support teachers through moderation of assessments within school and with other schools are paying off. However, in classes, particularly in the secondary phase, teachers are not routinely using ongoing assessments to plan or adapt their teaching to ensure that pupils are secure in their understanding. This work is stronger in the primary phase, where staff use their assessments to identify pupils who need additional teaching, especially those whose attainment is low. They also regularly reorganise groupings to ensure that pupils are receiving teaching that meets their needs more closely. This is especially the case in the teaching of phonics.

Teachers in the secondary phase do not give sufficient attention to improving pupils' literacy skills. In Year 7, almost two thirds of pupils read at a standard below that typical for their age. Approximately one third read well below the typical standard. Schemes of learning do not clearly promote pupils' language development and so pupils do not catch up rapidly. Pupils' spelling is also weak. Teaching staff have had little training in this aspect of their work, despite it being a major hindrance to pupils developing a secure understanding of the topics they study.

Leaders' actions to improve the teaching of reading in key stages 1 and 2 are not fully effective. Pupils in the primary phase are beginning to make better progress in their reading. However, pupils who did not achieve the expected standard at the end of key stage 1 continue to struggle. Few are enthusiastic about reading and most have low self-confidence and low self-esteem. As a result of the weaker teaching they often experience, these pupils do not make the rapid progress they need to make, and they achieve significantly less well than other pupils.

Writing across both phases is not yet well developed. Pupils are not routinely provided with the opportunities or structures that will help them to construct pieces of extended writing.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Overall, an inclusive culture is now seen across the school. Any racist incidents are now rare and limited to a few incidents of thoughtless behaviour in the primary phase. The vast majority of pupils commented on leaders' clear drive on the school values, particularly that of respect. Assemblies are used effectively to teach pupils about other religions and faiths. Pupils in the secondary phase enjoy their regular 'Learning for Life' sessions that help them understand different cultures and faiths. Pupils in key stage 4 are briefed well about the risks they may face from extremism and radicalisation. Pupils in key stage 3 and the primary phase are less clear about these risks.

Leaders have reorganised the pastoral support team to improve the effectiveness of monitoring and improving pupils' attendance. A specialist firm supported the school throughout the previous academic year to introduce a new approach to managing attendance and this is being implemented consistently. As a result, attendance in the previous academic year rose by two points to 92%. However, attendance remains well below the national average.

Compared to the same period last year, attendance has improved for all groups of pupils, particularly in the primary phase. Disadvantaged pupils continue to attend less regularly than their classmates. Those pupils who receive their education with an alternative provider have particularly low attendance rates.

The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school has fallen, although this too remains well above the national average. More than a quarter of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities are persistently absent from school. Leaders' work to support pupils with additional needs is limited in its impact to improve their attendance.

Outcomes for pupils

In the Nursery, staff are working well to develop children's language, and the teaching of phonics is generally strong. Children are happy to talk to adults, take turns and play cooperatively. They can sustain their attention for a prolonged period, follow instructions and complete the activities that are planned accurately. As a result, children arrive in the Reception Year with the knowledge and skills typical for their age.

However, leaders have not ensured that the transition from Nursery to Reception is planned well. Added to this, many children do not attend the school's Nursery and so their experiences of early education are different. Teachers' assessments of what children know, understand and can do lack accuracy and precision at the start of the Reception Year. As a result, staff and governors do not have an accurate view of children's abilities on entry to the Reception class.

In 2018, results at the end of key stage 2 were higher in almost all measures than

in the previous year. Pupils are still working below the standards expected for their age in reading and writing. In mathematics, pupils made stronger progress. The middle prior-attaining pupils and the most able made stronger progress than other pupils nationally. Disadvantaged pupils continue to achieve less well than their classmates in reading and writing. The low prior-attaining pupils still make the least progress and they are working well below other pupils of similar ability nationally. Poor attendance often impedes the progress of these groups of pupils. Leaders have not ensured that the resources needed to support these pupils are precisely matched to the pupils' needs.

In the secondary phase, provisional progress information confirms a decline compared to the previous year. This is principally due to the restructuring of the curriculum at the start of Year 11 for this cohort. Almost two thirds of pupils ceased to follow a qualification in modern foreign languages and many followed courses which do not qualify for the government's 'Progress 8' measure. Subject by subject, however, there is slight improvement and the proportion of pupils reaching a grade 4 in their GCSE studies increased. In most subjects, very few pupils achieved the higher grades.

Pupils who were previously low-attaining and those who have SEN and/or disabilities make slow progress. Additional teaching for these pupils is provided but the impact it has is not making a big enough difference to compensate for previously weak teaching. Leaders are not yet allocating sufficient resources or holding teaching staff to account strongly enough for the progress of these pupils. As a result, low-attaining pupils do not achieve well.

Those pupils who attend alternative providers make very little progress. Many have little contact with a tutor and others do not attend regularly. Leaders are reducing the number of pupils who are educated elsewhere. However, they recognise that they do not track this group of pupils with the precision needed to ensure that they make progress in their academic and personal development.

External support

The trust's head of academy improvement is working with staff in the primary phase to improve standards, particularly in reading and writing. This is bringing about a better quality of education in English lessons, but it is still not ensuring that pupils are catching up quickly enough. The impact of this work cannot be seen in pupils' work in a range of other subjects.

Leaders have brought in support from several other schools, particularly Colston's Girls' School, which is in the same multi-academy trust. This is improving the reliability of assessments and providing middle leaders in the secondary phase with colleagues to work with.

The headteacher is receiving support from the new interim CEO. This is bringing a

sharper focus and an increased urgency in the work that is needed. The headteacher is also being supported by the CEO of another local multi-academy trust, which is helping her to retain an objective view of the school's strengths and weaknesses.