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Mr Iain Robinson
Principal
University of Chester CE Academy
164 Whitby Road
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Cheshire
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Dear Mr Robinson

Special measures monitoring inspection of University of Chester CE Academy

Following my visit with Alyson Middlemass, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 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 April 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

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 school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the statement-of-action committee, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the

Diocese of Chester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire West and Chester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that the vision and ambitions of the multi-academy trust are evident in the work undertaken to drive rapid improvement in the quality of education
 - evaluating information about the behaviour, attendance and progress of underperforming groups of pupils more concisely so that those responsible for governance are better able to act swiftly on the information they receive
 - developing more focused and concise improvement plans
 - making criteria by which the success of actions in school improvement plans are judged more precise so that leaders and governors can identify quickly when their policies are not having the intended impact
 - improving the effectiveness of senior leadership and the leadership of subject areas
 - securing the viability of the sixth form and its courses by ensuring that plans to increase the recruitment of students are implemented without delay.
- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that teachers develop a wider range of classroom strategies to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils, particularly those who are most able
 - making sure that the work takes into account pupils' capabilities and prior attainment so that all are challenged to make the progress of which they are capable, especially most-able pupils
 - increasing teachers' expectations of what all groups of pupils are capable of achieving
 - ensuring that teaching captures and retains pupils' interest
 - making sure that teachers and teaching assistants make more consistent use of the strategies and resources identified in individual learning plans to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - increasing rates of attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those whose attendance falls below 90%
 - working with parents, carers and external agencies to improve the poor behaviour of a significant minority of pupils
 - developing the skills of those teachers who struggle to manage behaviour

and pupils' disengagement in their classrooms.

■ Raise pupils' attainment and progress by:

- ensuring that leaders identify the barriers to learning of disadvantaged pupils more precisely so that the link between barriers and actions for improvement is more explicit and the impact of spending of the pupil premium funding on attainment and progress is more measurable
- ensuring that teaching provides sufficient opportunity for pupils who have significant gaps in their learning to catch up rapidly with their peers, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities
- developing pupils' literacy skills systematically in all subject areas so that they are better able to express themselves orally and in extended writing
- ensuring that pupils develop the numeracy skills necessary to make good progress across the curriculum, particularly in science, geography and history
- implementing the curriculum, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities, in a way which focuses on extending pupils' transferable knowledge, skills and understanding
- ensuring that liaison with feeder primary schools includes the gathering of detailed information about what pupils have already achieved in each subject so that the curriculum does not repeat unnecessarily what has already been achieved.

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 pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 16 to 17 October 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documentation and met with senior and middle leaders. They spoke with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT), the chair of the statement-of-action committee (SOAC), and the leader of the Cheshire Vale Teaching School Alliance (CVTSA). Inspectors met with groups of pupils and staff. They observed teaching and learning jointly with senior leaders and scrutinised samples of pupils' work. They observed how pupils behaved around the school during break and lunchtime.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been considerable changes made to the school's teaching staff. A vice-principal has left the school, as has an assistant principal who was also the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). An existing teacher at the school has been promoted to be the new SENCo. She has considerable experience of undertaking this role in the past. Thirteen teachers have left the school and nine teachers have joined, including three teachers of mathematics, two teachers of English, and four teachers of science. The leaders of mathematics, science and history have also left. New leaders of science and mathematics now work at the school and a new leader of history has been appointed following an internal promotion, as has a teacher who contributes to the leadership of the English department. Since the previous monitoring visit, the school has reduced its reliance on temporary teachers. In the summer of 2018, the Department for Education announced that UCAT would be dissolved. Plans for the school to be re-brokered as part of a new multi-academy trust are well developed.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have capitalised on the momentum that they were starting to build at the time of the last monitoring visit. They have consolidated the improvements that inspectors saw in the school's ethos and pupils' behaviour and attendance and have built upon them further. Although leaders were unable to prevent a further decline in the outcomes achieved by Year 11 pupils in the 2018 external examinations, they have been able to improve teaching in most subjects. In particular, teaching has started to develop in those areas where it was particularly poor, such as science, mathematics and humanities. As a result, there are clear signs that pupils are now making significantly stronger progress throughout the school. Furthermore, the differences in achievement between key groups of pupils, such as the disadvantaged, and others nationally are beginning to diminish. Despite this, leaders are under no illusion about the scale of the task still facing the school. Although improvements to pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare are embedded, leaders accept that their actions to improve teaching have only recently started to have a positive impact. Consequently, they recognise the potential fragility of these embryonic developments.

Leaders have been able to take further huge strides towards improving pupils' behaviour and attendance. Pupils recognise, and greatly appreciate, these developments. One pupil summed up the views of many when describing the school as 'massively improved' since being placed in special measures. Pupils recognise the sea change in the school's ethos. Indeed, some older pupils said that they feel frustrated because they have not had the same opportunities as pupils in the current Year 7. Morale has also remained high among members of staff despite the turbulence and high staff turnover that have continued to affect the school since the previous monitoring visit. Staff feel energised and motivated to improve the school.

The principal has strengthened systems for ensuring that all staff are accountable for the quality of their work. Considerable work has been undertaken to develop middle leaders so that they are able to hold staff to account for the impact of their teaching on pupils' outcomes. Middle leaders now feel empowered to make a positive impact in their areas. They value the support that they have received from colleagues from CVTSA, both in relation to the development of their generic leadership skills and the advancement of the curriculum, teaching and assessment in their subjects. They feel well supported by senior leaders. They say that they have now been provided with the 'platform' to make the changes that are necessary. As a result, subject leaders have been able to make promising improvements to the quality of teaching, particularly in key stage 4.

Leaders have become much more systematic in their approach to improving the school's work. Their plans to improve the school are far more methodical and include a broad and appropriate range of strategies for the areas that require the most urgent attention. Leaders have included clear and measurable success criteria in their plans, which now provide clear milestones against which they can be held to account for their work. They also monitor and evaluate the school's performance in most areas effectively. Where they do this particularly well, such as in relation to pupils' behaviour and attendance, it has helped them to take decisive action to improve the school's work rapidly.

Leaders have ensured that training opportunities for staff are leading directly to improvements in the school's work. They have a clear rationale for the training that they provide for individuals and different groups of staff. Where leaders work with colleagues from other institutions, such as the University of Chester and CVTSA, they are frank and open about what they want the impact of such collaborative work to be. Their work to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching has provided them with clear insights into the strengths and developmental needs of different members of staff. They use this knowledge to ensure that staff benefit from support in the areas where they most need it. They also use their understanding to encourage teachers with particular strengths to support others and share good practice. As a result, the school's reliance on external support is diminishing.

Leaders have made appropriate modifications to the key stage 4 curriculum following an extensive consultation with pupils, parents and carers. Leaders have widened the vocational curriculum to include subjects such as business studies, health and social care, and travel and tourism. They have also significantly increased the amount of choice that pupils in key stage 4 have over the subjects that they study. They have broadened the curriculum so that it meets the needs of a wider range of pupils. They have ensured that all pupils study a curriculum with a strong academic core. For example, it is compulsory for all pupils to study a humanities subject as well as religious studies. This reflects leaders' high aspirations for all pupils' learning, while acknowledging that some pupils may wish to pursue a more vocational pathway once they leave the school. Leaders' work to develop the quality of the curriculum in each subject is less developed, particularly in key stage 3. Although some work has been done to liaise with primary schools to ensure that topics are not needlessly repeated in key stage 3, this work is in its infancy.

Leaders' use of the pupil premium funding has secured tangible improvements to the attendance and behaviour of disadvantaged pupils. Leaders understand the local community well and have a clear appreciation of the barriers to learning typically faced by disadvantaged pupils at the school. Although their use of the funding did not prevent a further decline in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 in 2018, the evidence gathered on this monitoring visit indicates that disadvantaged pupils are now making significantly stronger progress throughout the school.

Leaders have a sound rationale for their use of the additional funding to help pupils needing to catch up with their peers in English and mathematics when they join the school. Despite this, their systems for evaluating the impact of this spending are imprecise and do not enable them to evaluate clearly whether these pupils are catching up.

Trustees from UCAT and members of the SOAC have continued to support and challenge leaders effectively. They have adopted a 'business as usual' attitude despite the impending closure of the multi-academy trust. They have worked creatively with the school's leaders to recruit teachers and reduce the school's reliance on temporary teaching staff. It is apparent from their words and actions that they remain passionately committed to the school's values and to its pupils. Despite arranging a great deal of external support for the school, they have helped leaders to be mindful of the need to become, to a large extent, self-sufficient. As a result, they have ensured that leaders have been clear with those providing support what the intended impact of their work is and how it will contribute to sustainable improvement. Trustees and members of the SOAC have a clear overall understanding of the school's strengths and those areas still requiring attention. They are fully committed to working closely with an incoming multi-academy trust to ensure a seamless transition.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders, trustees and members of the SOAC acknowledge that they were initially unable to secure significant improvements to the quality of teaching. The findings from the previous monitoring visit highlighted the lack of progress that they had made in this area. This contrasted markedly with the clear improvements that had been made to pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare.

Positively, leaders have now been able to facilitate clear improvements to teaching across the curriculum and throughout the school. Despite this, the rate of improvement has been uneven. Teaching in those subjects that have been most affected by high staff turnover is typically not as developed as it is in subjects where there has been less turbulence. Teaching and assessment in key stage 3 have not seen the same level of improvement as in key stage 4. During the monitoring visit, lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work indicated that in mixed-ability classes teachers do not match work sufficiently well to pupils' prior attainment and capabilities. In contrast, in those classes grouped by ability, teachers ensured that there was a good match of work to pupils' learning needs. Consequently, leaders recognise that significant improvements still need to be made to ensure that teaching is consistently effective.

Leaders have overseen a productive recruitment drive since last Easter. They have been able to assemble a teaching staff that is significantly stronger and more stable than in recent years. In particular, the school is no longer reliant on temporary staff. These developments are epitomised by the changes that have been made to the mathematics department. The school now has a full complement of specialist mathematics teachers.

Crucially, teaching is showing significant signs of improvement in areas where it has been very weak. For example, the teaching of mathematics is far more effective than it has been in recent times. New leaders of mathematics have improved the ways in which teachers assess pupils' learning. This is enabling teachers to provide pupils with work that is well matched to their needs. It also addresses the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding that have appeared due to weak teaching over time. The teaching of science has also improved, but not to the same extent as it has in mathematics. Teaching in science is sometimes imprecise and teachers of this subject are not doing enough to address the huge gaps in pupils' knowledge that are the legacy of poor teaching.

In some subjects, pupils lack the skills, knowledge and understanding to be able to make good progress with the work currently being set by their teachers. For example, some pupils lack an understanding of different literary devices. This impedes their ability to write creatively and analyse text. However, there are clear signs that English teachers are beginning to address these gaps in pupils' prior knowledge through a range of strategies that are very well matched to pupils' abilities and needs. A similar approach is being adopted across other subjects, although the extent to which teaching compensates for the legacy of weak teaching

remains inconsistent.

Teachers are making a conscious effort to ensure that teaching is more challenging than in the past. This reflects the higher expectations that teachers now have for pupils' academic achievement. Pupils appreciate the greater challenge that teaching now provides. In particular, the most able pupils are relishing the opportunity to learn and apply more sophisticated concepts. On the other hand, not all teaching provides pupils with the support and structure that is required to give them access to more demanding work. In some cases, imprecise explanations from teachers do not enable pupils to understand new ideas that are being introduced. In other cases, teachers use complex learning strategies that overwhelm pupils' working memories and prevent them from engaging more deeply with the subject matter. These weaknesses are more pronounced in key stage 3.

Pupils' behaviour is very positive in lessons. This ensures that they waste little time due to poor behaviour. Pupils have been supported by staff to become effective learners. Most pupils are enthusiastic and keen to do well. They are increasingly demonstrating the independent learning skills that underpin effective learning over time. They are also more interested in their work and they are far less apathetic than in the past. They complete their homework diligently, although the tasks that teachers set do not consistently help pupils to learn new things well or to consolidate previous learning.

Teaching across the curriculum still does not systematically help pupils to develop their literacy skills. Although teachers have higher expectations of pupils' writing, they are less effective at providing them with the help that they need to make their writing more technically accurate and fluent. Furthermore, teachers' questioning does not routinely encourage the development of pupils' speaking skills. Where teachers question effectively, pupils are helped to articulate their ideas clearly. When this happens, the written work that they produce is more developed and has greater precision and clarity. Similarly, pupils are not taught systematically to develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum, although the school has introduced some promising initiatives to improve their numeracy skills during form time.

Subject leaders have improved the way that teachers assess what pupils know, understand and can do, particularly in key stage 4. These leaders have redesigned assessment based upon a clear understanding of what information they want such assessments to provide. Assessment at key stage 4 now provides teachers with a clearer understanding of the quality of pupils' learning over time. It also provides information that highlights where pupils' learning is weaker. As a result, leaders' information about the progress being made by pupils in key stage 4 is now more reliable. However, assessment in key stage 3 is less developed and therefore leaders' information does not provide them with an accurate overview of the progress that pupils are making lower down the school.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Leaders have continued to build upon the improvements in pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare that inspectors noted at the time of the previous monitoring visit.

Pupils behave very well in lessons and around the school site. They are polite, respectful and friendly. Their attitudes and behaviour now reflect the values promoted by the school. They appreciate the way that behaviour is now managed in a clear, consistent and proportionate manner. Leaders' information convincingly demonstrates that there has been a significant reduction in both serious and low-level misbehaviour. For example, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of detentions issued by staff for poor behaviour. The frequency with which staff call senior leaders to intervene when pupils disrupt learning has also decreased significantly. Leaders are also using fixed-term exclusion as a sanction less frequently, although rates of exclusion remain above historic national averages. The school has also strengthened its approach to promoting positive behaviour through rewards. A typical view from a pupil summed up this recent shift in emphasis: 'Teachers in school are now more worried about you being good.'

Leaders have been able to oversee a significant and sustained improvement in pupils' attendance. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent fell significantly during the last academic year, as did the rate of overall absence. Evidence from the end of the last academic year and the start of the current academic year indicates that rates of attendance continue to improve at pace. Pupils' attendance is now close to historic national averages and improving. The attendance of all groups of pupils has been strengthened because of leaders' actions. The school now works effectively with parents, carers and external agencies to improve the attendance of pupils who do not go to school regularly. Despite this, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities miss more school than their classmates and their peers nationally. Pupils told inspectors that attendance has improved because of many factors, such as the relentless promotion of this aspect of school life by staff. However, pupils were adamant that the main reasons why it is improving are because teaching has improved and because they feel that staff care for them far more as individuals.

Pupils are also more punctual. Staff welcome pupils in the areas neighbouring the school, including in the local town centre, as they travel to school. This has greatly improved punctuality and reduced the amount of poor behaviour from pupils on the way to and from school. This strategy reflects the commitment of staff and demonstrates their willingness to go the extra mile to secure necessary improvements.

The school has also had a positive impact on the behaviour of pupils who have exhibited challenging behaviour in the past. In some cases, staff have overseen a dramatic transformation in the conduct of individual pupils. Leaders have utilised a

range of creative strategies to improve pupils' behaviour, such as the use of temporary placements at partner schools. Pupils told inspectors that the school's use of behaviour-support plans helped to provide them with the focus and structure that was necessary for them to improve their conduct and concentrate more on their work. The school's improved ethos, with its focus on care and attending to the needs of every pupil, has also contributed to pupils' improved behaviour. The implementation of new behaviour systems, in conjunction with improved behaviour-management training for staff, has resulted in staff managing pupils' behaviour far more effectively than in the past.

Outcomes for pupils

Leaders were unable to prevent a further decline in outcomes for Year 11 pupils who left the school in 2018. These pupils had underachieved significantly across the curriculum. Leaders' evaluations of the progress made by this group during the previous academic year indicated that they were making greater progress than their counterparts from the previous year. Despite this, their performance in the summer examinations indicates that they had in fact made significantly less progress across the curriculum than their predecessors. Provisional information indicates that pupils' progress during their time at the school was over a full grade less than all pupils nationally in English, mathematics and in the other subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate. The last three Year 11 cohorts have therefore made inadequate progress during their time at the school and the picture created by historic external data is one of continued decline.

Despite this, leaders' information about the progress of pupils currently at the school paints a different picture. Their information indicates that pupils currently in Year 11 had made significantly more progress by the end of Year 10 than their counterparts from the previous year. Importantly, leaders have undertaken a great deal of work to improve the accuracy of their evaluations of pupils' achievement in key stage 4. Teachers regularly moderate their assessments of pupils' attainment with colleagues, including those from CVTSA. Leaders have also redesigned their assessment calendars to ensure that teachers are able to evaluate the quality of pupils' learning over time, rather than simply evaluating their short-term recall of content from small and recently studied parts of the curriculum. Pupils in Year 11 have recently undertaken mock examinations in English and mathematics. These assessments have been designed to sample their understanding of the whole curriculum in both subjects. The outcomes of these assessments indicate that pupils currently in Year 11 are already achieving better than the previous cohort did in the final external examinations, particularly in mathematics.

Leaders' information indicates that pupils lower down the school are making even stronger progress. It indicates that all groups of pupils, including the disadvantaged and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, are making much better progress, which compares favourably with others nationally. Despite this, leaders have done less work to ensure that their assessment of pupils' progress in key stage 3 provides a clear reflection of the quality of pupils' learning over time. Furthermore,

observations of teaching and a scrutiny of pupils' work confirmed that leaders' evaluations of pupils' progress in key stage 3 are overgenerous. Nevertheless, the same sources of evidence were able to confirm that pupils in key stage 3 are irrefutably making better progress than was previously the case.

16 to 19 study programmes

Students' outcomes on academic courses improved considerably in 2018. In particular, outcomes in physics and media studies were relative strengths. Despite these improvements, the 2018 results are likely to indicate that students' progress overall was significantly below that of similar students nationally. There were particular weaknesses in students' performance in biology, chemistry, ethics and philosophy and mathematics. The number of students opting to join the sixth form at the start of the current academic year was not as high as at the start of the previous academic year.

External support

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the trust has taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is now fit for purpose. Trust leaders have commissioned a broad and varied range of help for leaders at the school, which has gathered momentum since the previous monitoring visit. In particular, the school has been working extensively with members of staff from CVTSA, which supports many departments with specialist leaders of education. During the summer term, the leader of CVTSA continued to support the principal and vice-principal to develop their leadership skills, including the clarity of their vision for improving the school. Middle leaders have also benefited from the training provided by CVTSA to develop their ability to lead and manage their areas effectively. The CEO has also been instrumental in procuring help for different departments from the University of Chester. The English, mathematics, history, geography and religious studies departments have been the main recipients of this support. The school has also received support from other sources. For example, colleagues from the Cheshire West headteachers' group have recently reviewed different aspects of the school's work. Overall, this help has helped to develop the effectiveness of leadership. It has also contributed to the improvements that have been made to the quality of teaching.