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Mrs Jo Myhill-Johnson
Principal
Thomas Middlecott Academy
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Dear Mrs Myhill-Johnson

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Thomas Middlecott Academy

Following my visit to your school on 6 December 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection that took place in September 2017. 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 actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

the school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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 Lincolnshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Tordoff
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - evaluating the impact of the school’s work more sharply, and amending plans and strategies accordingly
 - accounting carefully for the allocation of additional funding and evaluating its impact on pupils’ progress, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - further empowering middle leaders to take greater responsibility for the quality of provision in their areas and ensuring that staff have the knowledge and skills to do this
 - clarifying the distinction between governance and trust support to ensure that leaders are fully held to account
 - ensuring that the academy trust is more effective in supporting leaders and responding to identified needs, particularly in regard to appointing permanent, high-calibre staff.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use assessment information to plan activities which meet the different needs of pupils
 - have high expectations of what pupils are able to achieve
 - set appropriately challenging targets, including for those pupils who are new to the school
 - plan activities which challenge all pupils
 - plan activities which inspire, interest and enthuse pupils so that they are supported to become more effective learners.
- Further improve pupils’ personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - sustaining improvements in pupils’ attendance
 - developing strategies to encourage pupils to make a stronger contribution to their own learning
 - maintaining the improvements in behaviour throughout the school.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 6 December 2018

Evidence

During this inspection, the inspector held meetings with the principal, senior leaders, subject leaders and teachers. She spoke with leaders responsible for safeguarding and the coordinator for the provision of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The inspector observed learning in a small number of lessons, jointly with the acting-assistant principal. She met with a group of pupils in Years 10 and 11 about their learning and reviewed evidence of this with them in their workbooks. The inspector spoke with the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. She also held a meeting with the trust's regional director and the deputy chief executive officer, which the chief executive officer joined via the telephone.

The inspector scrutinised documents, including current pupils' progress information, pupils' attendance records, senior leaders' evaluations of the school's work, and information relating to safeguarding. She analysed a range of documentation relating to the school's governance, including recent minutes of meetings. The trust's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

A new team of senior leaders took up their positions in September 2018. The principal was appointed, having supported the school while leading another school within the trust. The vice principal assumed a temporary position, with responsibility for personal development, behaviour and welfare, and for safeguarding. His position was made permanent in December 2018. A head of English and expressive arts, who has concurrently been the acting-assistant principal, was appointed with explicit responsibility for teaching and learning.

At the start of this academic year, three new progress leaders were established, with oversight of Years 7 and 8, Year 9, and Years 10 and 11. Meanwhile, an additional role was created within English to support the work of the department. Despite these appointments, the recruitment and retention of teachers remains a challenge for the school, particularly subject leaders. While a new head of science and technology is due to start at the school in January 2019, the principal has chosen not to recruit a new head of humanities and modern foreign languages until the right candidate becomes available. A notable proportion of current teachers are on temporary contracts.

Within the trust, a new regional director was appointed in September 2018, providing senior leaders with support in their new roles. More recently, a new deputy chief executive officer took up his position in November 2018. The trust has also recruited new geography, history and modern foreign languages subject leads, who spend a proportion of each week working with the school's teachers.

Significant changes to governance have taken place since the previous monitoring inspection. The academy improvement board was dissolved, and a new local governing body is now in place, with responsibility for overseeing educational standards across the school.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

New senior leaders have high expectations and are ambitious for the school and its pupils. They have a clear and uncompromising focus on improving the quality of education. Leaders identify accurately strengths and areas that require significant improvements. Their development plans are appropriate and focus clearly on improving the quality and consistency of the teaching. Leaders review the progress of these plans regularly against precise success criteria, so they can modify their strategies, and secure sustainable improvements in pupils' outcomes.

Leaders have raised expectations of each teacher's performance. They carry out systematic monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning and are swift to respond to any weaknesses identified. They provide teachers with close support and guidance where necessary. Teachers value the additional training that is available to help them improve their practice, for example, of how to plan effectively or how to engage pupils successfully with their learning. Similarly, senior leaders arrange training for those new to leadership at all levels, to help to develop their skills, so they can be successful in their roles.

Leaders use pupils' information to hold subject leaders to account more effectively. Equally, subject leaders are working more closely with teachers to identify those pupils who are not performing as well as they should and who require support. These leaders are more confident in their responsibilities for holding teachers to account for pupils' progress through scrutiny of pupils' work and observations of pupils' learning. While some subject leaders feel less empowered under the new senior leadership, they recognise this is necessary while senior leaders ensure that new systems and policies are implemented consistently by all staff.

In 2018, disadvantaged pupils' progress improved, particularly in English, with the gap between these pupils and other pupils nationally diminishing. However, disadvantaged pupils' progress was still much lower than the national average. Leaders have not ensured that plans to support current disadvantaged pupils are thorough and monitored closely. There is an overemphasis on disadvantaged pupils currently in Year 11, to the detriment of disadvantaged pupils in other year groups.

Leaders are now tracking the progress of pupils with SEND more closely, including their literacy skills. The coordinator for the provision of pupils with SEND provides teachers with additional training, so they can support these pupils. However, some teachers are not fully aware of these pupils' needs and, therefore, do not plan accordingly. Previously, leaders have not ensured that additional funding for these

pupils is being used effectively, contributing to pupils with SEND making weak progress from their starting points. Leaders are now implementing more intensive programmes to help pupils with SEND to achieve well from their starting points. It is too early to assess the impact of these strategies.

Leaders have improved the rigour with which they collect and analyse information about pupils' progress, including for those pupils who are new to the school. They hold regular meetings with subject and progress leaders to review pupils' progress. Leaders provide teachers with support to improve the reliability and accuracy of their assessments. All teachers maintain a 'class teacher file', which includes their planning and information about the pupils they teach. Leaders regularly review these files and challenge teachers to improve their practice. However, they recognise that some teachers do not use pupils' information confidently to inform and modify their planning.

Since the last monitoring visit, the quality of teaching has continued to improve, particularly in mathematics and English. More teachers are planning activities which interest pupils and help them to become better learners. In some subjects, pupils benefit from incisive feedback from their teachers and they are challenged to achieve well. However, teachers' expectations are not consistently high, particularly of the most able pupils. Pupils are acutely aware that there are gaps in their knowledge due to previously poor teaching, for example in science and humanities. This contributes to some pupils lacking confidence in their own abilities to achieve well. Leaders are acting to rectify this; for instance, in history support from the trust's subject lead is improving pupils' knowledge.

Leaders introduced a new trust behaviour policy in September 2018. Staff have had training focused on, 'ready to teach, ready to learn'. However, leaders and pupils say that some teachers do not apply the policy consistently yet. In many lessons, pupils have positive attitudes to learning and engage well with activities. However, when learning activities are not as inspiring or challenging as they should be, pupils sometimes cause low-level disruption, affecting the learning of others.

Leaders meet weekly to discuss any pupils who are vulnerable and may require additional support, to ensure that no pupil is able to 'fall through the net'. Early evidence suggests that a newly established inclusion room is effective at reducing incidents of poor behaviour; however, it is too early to evaluate its long-term impact. At the time of the last monitoring visit, the proportion of pupils excluded from school had begun to decrease. This reduction has continued. However, too many pupils are still excluded from school, particularly disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND.

Leaders' strategies to monitor pupils' attendance closely and provide support to families have been effective. By the end of Summer term 2018, pupils' attendance had risen and was above the national average. Pupils with SEND, pupils who speak English as an additional language and disadvantaged pupils had recorded

attendances close to the respective national averages. The attendance of current pupils continues to improve. In a similar vein, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is now below the national average.

Following a review of governance, there is now a clear separation between the roles of the local governing body and the trust. The trust's scheme of delegation has recently been revised to reflect the changing governance responsibilities. While the governing body has only met on two occasions so far since its creation in September 2018, there is already evidence that members have the necessary skills and expertise to scrutinise school leaders' work, providing them with the right level of support and challenge.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teachers are positive about the changes to senior leadership since the last monitoring visit. They say leaders are consistent in their approach to implementing improvements and they feel well supported.
- Since September 2018, teachers have delivered a new trust-wide curriculum in all subjects. This allows teachers to share resources and good practice with colleagues in other schools, as well as providing them with opportunities to moderate pupils' work. Leaders are increasingly confident in the accuracy of teachers' assessments of pupils' work.
- Leaders monitor the quality of teaching closely. Where necessary, they provide teachers with individualised support. More recently, leaders have set up a teaching and learning group composed of teachers whose practice is strong, so they can guide and coach others. The quality of teaching is improving.
- Pupils' attendance has noticeably improved. They value the education they receive, even though they know it is not always of a good quality.
- In 2018, pupils' progress was closer to, but still well below, the national average, particularly in English and mathematics, compared with 2017. School's information indicates that current pupils' outcomes in Years 10 and 11 are also improving, although this is not consistently evident in pupils' workbooks.
- Leaders have quickly established supportive relationships with members of the governing body. They provide governors with clear information, focused closely on the school's plans for improvement. Governors are well informed and realistic about the work that needs to be done to improve the school.
- Leaders work effectively with trust leaders to improve the quality of the provision. They have recently introduced more rigorous trust-wide systems and procedures. Meanwhile, leaders actively contribute to trust initiatives, ensuring that they influence decisions made by trust leaders that affect the school's work.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders focus too closely on pupils' attainment, rather than on their progress from different starting points. This contributes to leaders not ensuring that the most able pupils are challenged sufficiently or pupils with SEND are provided with effective support, so that all pupils make the progress of which they are capable.
- In 2018, disadvantaged pupils, pupils with SEND and the most able pupils did not make good progress, compared with national averages. Currently, these groups of pupils in Year 11 are still not making good progress.
- Leaders' plans to allocate additional funds to support disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND do not contain the necessary information that would allow governors to check how well they are being implemented. This contributes to those responsible for governance not being able to hold leaders to account for the efficient use of these funds or the impact they have on the progress these pupils make.
- Some teaching is not of a good standard. In these instances, teachers' expectations are too low, and they do not plan or adapt learning to closely meet pupils' needs. Some teachers do not possess secure subject knowledge to allow them to challenge pupils to make good progress. Inevitably, inconsistencies in teaching quality have a detrimental impact on pupils' learning.
- While the proportion of pupils excluded from school is falling, a small minority of pupils do not behave well, sometimes affecting the learning of others.

External support

The school is part of the Transforming Schools Pilot Partnership. Leaders receive visits from a representative of the Department for Education to support their work to bring about improvements.

Leaders collaborate with seven other local schools, as part of the Boston Project, to share good practice.