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4 March 2019

Ms Samantha Williamson  
Principal  
Merchants' Academy  
Gatehouse Avenue  
Withywood  
Bristol  
BS13 9AJ

Dear Ms Williamson

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of Merchants' Academy**

Following my visit with David New, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 13 to 14 February 2019, 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 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Venturers' 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 third monitoring inspection on 13 to 14 February 2019**

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, head of primary, senior and middle leaders. Discussions also took place with the executive lead of the Venturers' Trust, three trustees and three members of the academy focused improvement committee (AFIC).

Inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke with pupils. Inspectors met with parents of children in both primary and secondary phases.

### **Context**

Since the monitoring inspection in October 2018, there have been significant changes in the leadership of the multi-academy trust, including the appointment of a trust-wide executive lead. Trust and school leaders have identified specialist advisers and strategic partnerships with other local multi-academy trusts to work with the school to ensure that there is precision in the support that is provided.

A small number of teaching staff have left the school, and some have joined, including a new assistant vice-principal in the secondary phase.

Substantial changes have been made to strengthen the governance arrangements of the school. The AFIC was established in November 2018. This small sub-group of existing governors have identified and are monitoring the most significant priorities for improvement. During this inspection, a new chair of trustees was appointed.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

With the introduction of the AFIC, trustees are now holding leaders to account tightly for progress in the areas that need the greatest and most rapid improvement. They use their own expertise to test systems first hand, providing trustees with the necessary assurances that leaders' actions are leading to improvements. As a result, trustees and governors have a much more accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. From this, they deploy resources much more precisely to tackle the shortcomings.

Senior leaders have responded robustly to the findings of the previous monitoring inspection. They have initiated many strategies to improve particular aspects of the school's work and recognise that some have had greater impact than others. The early work to improve pupils' literacy skills is one example where demonstrable improvements can be seen. The refinement of curriculum planning is another. However, the work to improve the provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has not been successful. The improvement plan for this area does not focus adequately on the prioritisation and sequencing of actions to bring about the necessary changes.

Many leaders benefit from coaching and support from other schools in the trust. In other areas, consultants are being used to give middle and senior leaders the support they need. This is helping leaders to ensure that there is stronger progress in the areas they are responsible for.

Middle leaders in both phases have a clear understanding of the need for strong accountability. They appreciate the way that this is modelled by the senior leaders and feel empowered to hold their departmental staff to account because of the leadership from the senior team. This is leading to higher-quality teaching and learning in classes and better behaviour and attitudes towards learning by pupils. The early work on broadening pupils' vocabulary has been introduced successfully in most subjects and year groups.

Nonetheless, leaders have not yet been wholly successful in ensuring that all teachers have sufficiently high expectations of what pupils can do. Furthermore, there is little evidence of pupils with SEND being supported well in their learning.

### **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

The quality of teaching and learning is improving. Work with other schools is ensuring that curriculum planning and the accuracy of assessments are improving. However, across both phases, many teachers' subject-specific teaching skills are not well developed. Consequently, some of the school-wide initiatives are at a rudimentary level.

There are encouraging signs of teachers planning learning that more closely matches pupils' needs in some subjects in both phases, although there is still much to do to ensure that the most able are suitably challenged and that there is suitable support for those who struggle. The needs of pupils with SEND are not well met. To some extent, this is because their needs are not precisely understood, and staff have not had the training they need to plan appropriate learning or support pupils.

Teachers' expectations remain variable. Many teachers provide pupils with extensive feedback about their work, but few pupils use this to good effect to improve their work. Too often work missed through absence remains incomplete.

### **Personal development, behaviour and welfare**

The personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme in the secondary phase is providing opportunities in each year group to raise pupils' awareness of different cultures and beliefs. Pupils have a raised awareness of multi-cultural society. Many are actively engaging with Project Fearless, a project that supports young people to challenge stereotypes, intolerance of other cultures and extreme views.

The PSHE curriculum is complemented by a comprehensive assembly programme that increases pupils' awareness of the risks pupils may face in their community and globally. Leaders are currently reviewing the programme of religious education for the new academic year in the secondary phase.

There is relatively little evidence of pupils studying other religions and cultures in the primary phase.

Across both phases, the school's 'Bristol Values' have been reinvigorated. The scheme promotes the characteristics of boldness, respect, integrity, service, tenacity, optimism and learning and is now more closely linked to the school's rewards system.

As a result of the school's work, pupils show a respectful attitude to other pupils, including those who are different from themselves. Racist incidents have declined and are now relatively rare.

At the inspection in September 2017, pupils' attendance was very low. This had improved at the previous monitoring inspection. Currently, attendance is stronger for the first half of the academic year than it was in the same period in 2017/18. However, it is still well below levels seen typically nationally.

Persistent absenteeism is lower for the first half of the current academic year than in 2017/18. However, the current persistent absentee rates remain much higher than are typically seen.

### **Outcomes for pupils**

There is a school-wide focus on increasing pupils' exposure to high-quality novels that pupils may not read ordinarily, such as 'The Count of Monte Cristo'. Teachers engage pupils well in thinking about the story. Pupils recognise the increased focus on literacy across the school. They appreciate the new focus and understand how it is improving their life chances.

The development of opportunities for pupils to write and apply their mathematical knowledge is strengthening as a result of the revised curriculum in primary. Teachers in the primary phase are effective in their teaching to deepen pupils' understanding of English and mathematics. However, the quality of pupils' writing and the application of their mathematical skills are not as strong in the foundation subjects.

In the secondary phase, there is clear progress over time in pupils' literacy development. Pupils are developing a better knowledge of subject-specific vocabulary. This is beginning to be seen in pupils' writing in a range of subjects including science and the humanities.

In both primary and secondary phases, pupils are writing more and at greater length. This is allowing pupils to practise their skills. The school's approach to writing is helping pupils to articulate their thinking before they put pen to paper. Nonetheless, pupils in both phases do not write with sufficient technical accuracy and their spelling, punctuation and grammar are weak. Too often, these go unchecked. Where teachers identify errors, too few pupils learn from their mistakes.

The vast majority of children in the early years are enthusiastic about their learning and engage actively. Greater interaction between children and adults and effective questioning by adults are ensuring that children develop in their knowledge and understanding. Teachers have made a conscious effort to ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for pupils to practise their writing.

Although there has been strong progress in the early years, there is still variability in the impact of teaching in Reception. The most able children are not suitably challenged and there is insufficient support for those who struggle. Other adults are not fully effective in supporting teaching.

### **External support**

Trust and school leaders have engaged a wide range of support from specialist consultants and from other multi-academy trusts. The principal continues to benefit from leadership coaching. Other senior leaders now also benefit from leadership coaching. Another primary school in the trust is providing support for middle leaders in the primary phase.

In both phases, external support is being utilised effectively to improve the quality of training. In partnership with another multi-academy trust, leaders have introduced a programme of support to improve the quality of teaching successfully.

Internal support from the trust, particularly from leaders of the trust's other secondary school, is providing helpful support for the humanities in the secondary phase. Another multi-academy trust is providing additional resources to improve the outcomes of the most able pupils in Year 11.