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Mr Andrew Galbraith
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Dear Mr Galbraith

Special measures monitoring inspection of Highfield Leadership Academy

Following my visit with Jacqueline Cahalin, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 18 and 19 June 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in December 2018.

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.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2018.

- Improve urgently the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders make sure that arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective in creating a culture in which pupils are safe and feel safe
 - leaders take effective steps to minimise discriminatory behaviour and bullying across the school
 - teachers apply behaviour systems consistently to challenge and eliminate the poor and disrespectful behaviour of some pupils
 - leaders at every level, including those responsible for governance, have an accurate view of the quality of education that the school provides
 - leaders' decisions about the curriculum have a positive impact on pupils' progress at key stage 4 and are communicated clearly to pupils, parents and carers
 - middle leaders provide temporary staff with effective support to create an orderly learning environment
 - middle leaders provide temporary staff with effective support to organise pupils' learning effectively and fill the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding
 - leaders use additional funding effectively to make sure that disadvantaged pupils make at least the same progress as other pupils nationally.
- Improve immediately the provision for pupils' development and welfare by ensuring that:
 - pupils are confident that staff will listen to them and take their concerns seriously
 - pupils are confident that teachers will deal with incidents of bullying, including homophobic bullying, effectively
 - pupils are kind to each other and show respect and tolerance for their peers
 - pupils understand the negative effects of bullying and discriminatory behaviour.
- Rapidly improve pupils' behaviour by ensuring that:
 - pupils regulate their own behaviour around school without the need for high levels of staff supervision
 - pupils show respect for their teachers and follow instructions from staff
 - pupils refrain from swearing and using offensive language around school

- disruption in class is eradicated and pupils focus well on their learning
 - the attendance of all pupils, and particularly of disadvantaged pupils, continues to improve
 - pupils consistently arrive at school and their lessons on time.
- Improve the quality of teaching, so that pupils make the progress that they should in different year groups and in a range of subjects, including English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
- teachers have high expectations of pupils and insist on positive attitudes to learning
 - teaching is better planned to meet the needs of pupils, and particularly boys
 - teachers use assessment information to plan learning that challenges pupils, particularly those who are most able
 - teachers use information about what pupils know already to address the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding
 - plans to support pupils with SEND take sufficient account of individual special needs and staff have high expectations of what pupils with SEND can achieve.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 18 June 2019 to 19 June 2019

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, an executive director of education from the trust, senior leaders from the school and the trust, groups of pupils, a group of teachers, members of the local governing body and a representative from the local authority. They observed teaching and learning and looked at pupils' written work. They also talked informally to pupils and observed how they behaved around the school.

Context

A new principal was appointed in January 2019. Since the last inspection, two new assistant principals have joined the school, one in April and the other this month. An assistant principal from another school in the trust has been seconded to Highfield Leadership Academy for two years. A new director of learning for mathematics took up her post in April. The school has also appointed three teachers (mathematics, computing and science) since the last inspection. There will be seven new teachers joining the school in September, including a new director of learning for communications (English and modern foreign languages).

The effectiveness of leadership and management

There is no doubt that leaders' actions over the last six months have had a positive impact. As a result, Highfield Leadership Academy is in a much better place now than it was at the time of the last inspection. That said, there is still a long way to go if all pupils are to benefit from a high-quality education. Leaders are very much aware of how much remains to be done and the scale of the task ahead. Particularly impressive is their determination in the face of this challenge. Leaders demonstrate a tangible commitment to their pupils and the wider community.

The trust acted swiftly in appointing a new principal, who has already made a significant impact. He has been at the forefront of the implementation of new systems in school, particularly in relation to behaviour. Staff appreciate how approachable he is and his presence and visibility with the pupils. Younger pupils who spoke with inspectors commented on the difference that the new principal has made in improving the school.

The principal works closely with one of the trust's directors of education. The support and challenge that she provides to the principal and other leaders has been instrumental in bringing about improvements. Following the last inspection, the trust set up a dedicated support team for the school. This comprises four principals from other schools in the trust who are working with senior leaders on key areas. Their involvement has helped to get the school on to an even keel and has

increased the pace of improvement. There is a real sense of collective responsibility among the trust's leaders. They feel that Highfield Leadership Academy is very much a part of the trust's community and, as such, they all want it to succeed.

In the first couple of months following the last inspection, the support from the trust was intensive. As the school's own leadership team has developed, the support on the ground from other principals has reduced. However, they are still in weekly contact with leaders in school. The senior leadership team comprises a strong group of assistant principals who lead their respective areas well. They have a clear grasp of the challenges that they face if further improvements are to be made. The work that has taken place in the last two terms, introducing new systems and procedures means that the school is poised to make a strong start to the new academic year.

Leaders recognised that underpinning the many areas for improvement identified at the last inspection was the issue of the culture of the school. Leaders' efforts to address this have made a difference. The trust's values of service, teamwork, ambition and respect are high profile throughout the school. Many staff who spoke with inspectors said that there is a very different feel to the school now than six months ago.

Leaders understand the importance of good relationships and communication with parents. Following the last inspection, the principal invested a lot of time meeting with parents on an individual basis. Parents valued this opportunity. This has been the basis on which to build more constructive relationships with parents. For example, the newly formed parent forum was holding its inaugural meeting during the week of this monitoring inspection.

The school development plan provides clear strategic direction for the journey of improvement up to the end of the summer term 2020. The rapid improvement plan is a more operational document that is updated weekly. It is very much focused on monitoring and evaluating the impact of leaders' specific actions.

The current quality of middle leadership across the school is not strong. While there are some pockets of better practice, the overall quality of subject leadership is not good. The main area of concern is in English and a new subject leader has been appointed for September. It is too early to assess the impact of the new leadership in mathematics.

Following the last inspection, leaders worked closely with the trust and the local authority to ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, including protocols and practices related to recruitment. The school now has an effective working relationship with the local authority in matters relating to safeguarding.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

There has been some improvement in the overall quality of teaching in the last six months. That said, many pupils are still not benefiting from routinely high-quality teaching across their subjects, which is having a significant negative impact on their progress.

Leaders are planning for a full complement of permanent teaching staff from September. However, despite a reduction in the number of temporary and supply staff, at the time of this monitoring inspection, many pupils are still not being taught by a permanent specialist teacher. The negative impact of this situation is particularly evident in English, where only a very small proportion of pupils are benefiting from consistently strong teaching.

Leaders now provide all temporary and supply staff with a support handbook. This outlines the school's expectations alongside information about the behaviour and reward systems. In addition, leaders have created a rota to support temporary staff throughout the day. This has gone some way to improving the quality of learning for most pupils when they are taught by temporary and supply staff.

Leaders have introduced some key teaching expectations and classroom routines, particularly related to the way that lessons should start and finish. This has led to a more orderly environment in most classrooms. These new protocols and procedures have led to some improvements in how pupils are learning, but there remains much to be done in relation to the substance of what they are learning and how this is sequenced. From September, the school's and the trust's curriculum will be closely aligned.

Leaders shared with inspectors evidence of the success of the coaching programme for identified staff. The supportive approach of this programme has enabled staff not just to improve their classroom practice, but also their confidence. Where staff have not responded to this support, leaders have used more formal approaches to tackle underperformance.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Leaders swiftly realised that the behaviour policy that was in place at the last inspection was not fit for purpose. They wasted no time in introducing a new system that has much greater clarity. Leaders feel that this new system has enabled them to 'press the reset button'. They describe its impact in the classroom as 'allowing teachers to teach and pupils to learn'. This view is supported by teachers, one of whom told inspectors, 'We can actually teach now.' Another described the system as enabling them to 'own our classrooms'. One teacher explained how it has improved the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils which are now 'massively stronger' than six months ago.

Pupils also feel that the new system has improved behaviour around the school. Most of those who spoke with inspectors said that it has reduced disruption to learning in lessons. However, some felt that there is inconsistency in the way that teachers use the system. Pupils also told inspectors that there has been a reduction in the amount of bullying in the school. Leaders' efforts to change the culture of the school have contributed significantly to this reduction. There has also been a high-profile focus on tackling bullying, which has included the introduction of a team of anti-bullying ambassadors.

During the monitoring inspection, pupils generally conducted themselves well during social times and in lessons. Unlike at the last inspection, inspectors did not hear any pupils using inappropriate or offensive language. The new morning routine at the start of school ensures an organised and orderly beginning to the day.

When the new behaviour system was introduced there were a high number of referrals to the impact centre (the school's internal exclusion area). As most pupils have become used to the higher expectations, these numbers have reduced. The same pattern can be seen with fixed-term exclusions. However, despite a reduction this term, the number of fixed-term exclusions remains very high. Staff are now working with a small but significant number of recalcitrant pupils to help them to modify their behaviour.

The high fixed-term exclusion rate has exacerbated the school's low attendance figure. Improving pupils' attendance is high profile throughout the school. However, the overall attendance figure remains well below the national average. Leaders have tightened up procedures relating to punctuality, including tougher sanctions for lateness. There has been improvement in this area, but there are still too many pupils arriving late.

Outcomes for pupils

Following the last inspection, leaders in school, working alongside staff from the trust, prioritised Year 11 pupils. They focused on helping them to improve their performance in their forthcoming examinations. This cohort of pupils have been badly affected by the legacy of poor leadership and teaching in recent years. Consequently, these efforts have only had a limited effect in enabling these pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to make the progress of which they are capable.

These concerns do not just relate to Year 11. Pupils in other year groups are also not making good enough progress. The main reason for this is that they have too many gaps in their knowledge and understanding. This is the case across a range of subjects, but it is particularly concerning in English.

Working with staff from the trust, leaders have identified where the most significant gaps exist. The curriculum for Years 7 to 10 during this term is designed to address

these so that pupils have the necessary knowledge and understanding to make progress when they embark on the new curriculum in September.

Where pupils are receiving consistently high-quality teaching, this is reflected in the standard of work that they produce. However, in many pupils' books the amount of work covered, and its quality, gives great cause for concern. Pupils' books also reveal that some pupils have poor basic literacy skills which are not being tackled consistently.

External support

The school is part of a large trust that has an extensive range of expertise in running very successful schools. Leaders and staff have benefited from a wide range of support from within the trust. This has contributed significantly to the pace of improvement. There has, therefore, been no need for the school to draw on any further external support.