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Mr Robert Bowater
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Dear Mr Bowater

Summary evaluation of drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust

Following the summary evaluation of drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust ('the trust') in October 2019, when I was accompanied by Jo Evans, Her Majesty's Inspector, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the trust on 21–24 October 2019. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- The trust's vision and values are well understood by trustees, leaders and staff alike. Trustees set the positive culture and ethos evident in both schools and the central team. A sense of social responsibility drives trustees and leaders to improve the life chances of pupils in their schools. The central team's view that 'there is no trust without trust' embodies their approach to working together with school colleagues.
- The trust has created a 'golden thread of governance'. Trustees rigorously hold schools to account through termly external reviews, trust improvement board meetings and trustee committees. This close scrutiny means trustees know each individual school's needs and can prioritise resources appropriately.
- The trust has a good overview of its schools. Leaders and trustees challenge underperformance and focus on continuous improvement. There is now greater

capacity for school improvement support because of a number of recent appointments. This is part of the trustees' long-term improvement strategy.

- Ofsted judged six of the seven trust schools inspected during 2018/19 as good. In many cases, reports credited the trust with having brought about improvements through its effective input. Reports mention the trust's work to improve the quality of teaching, lead curriculum developments and enhance opportunities for pupils' personal development.
- The proportion of pupils who achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics in the key stage 2 national tests and assessments remains well below the national figure. Pupils' outcomes in reading declined at the end of key stage 2 in the summer of 2019. However, overall, pupils' outcomes are improving year-on-year in all other subjects, including writing and mathematics.
- All schools in the trust offer a broad and balanced topic-based curriculum. This is built around the requirements of the national curriculum. Leaders are using current research to further strengthen the curriculum. Schools are at different stages with this work. Across the trust, schools trial different approaches. Effective practices are then shared with other schools.
- Levels of pupils' attendance within the trust remain below the national rate. The proportion of pupils who regularly miss school is high in all the trust's schools. Across the trust, a range of different strategies to improve attendance are in place. These strategies are not effective in all schools but are having a positive impact in some and the good practice that exists is being shared.
- Until recently, the number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions has been very high. In trust schools, the arrival of a new headteacher and the introduction of a more robust behaviour policy is often linked to increases in the rate of exclusions. Exclusions in schools are now falling, but it is too soon to know whether this is a long-term trend.
- In the past, the trust has not always responded quickly enough to schools in need, leading to a drop in standards in these schools. Due to stronger governance and greater oversight by senior leaders, greater direction is now provided for more vulnerable schools. This is having the effect of stabilising and strengthening schools more quickly.
- The trust has clear plans to further improve its schools' effectiveness. Plans are well constructed and focus on the right areas to have maximum impact. They closely match areas for improvement identified in recent inspection reports. The impact of school and trust plans is tightly monitored and reported to senior leaders and trustees. As a result, plans are regularly amended according to need.
- There are clear professional development opportunities and career pathways in place for all school staff. These include teaching assistants, newly qualified teachers, middle leaders and executive headteachers. The trust's approach to professional development is helping to retain staff within trust schools.

- The trust has a strong, knowledgeable team in place to provide a variety of centralised functions to its schools. Headteachers value these services because they give senior leaders more time to focus on improving the quality of education on offer to pupils.

Range of evidence

For stage one of this summary evaluation, five schools were inspected across May and June 2019. All these inspections were carried out under either section 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005, as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- In the three section 5 inspections, two schools were judged to be good and one was judged to require improvement. One school declined from its predecessor school judgement of good to requires improvement, one school improved from its predecessor school judgement of inadequate to good and one school remained good.
- In the two section 8 inspections, both schools remained good.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff. We met with three representatives of the board of trustees, including the chair of the board and the chair of the achievement and scrutiny committee. We visited the four trust schools that had not been inspected during stage one of the summary evaluation process. In each of these schools, we met with the headteacher and a group of leaders and staff. A group meeting was held with the headteachers and heads of school from the five schools inspected during the summer term. We scrutinised a wide range of relevant documentation.

Context

drb Ignite Multi Academy Trust is a primary phase trust consisting of nine schools: seven primary, one infant and one junior. The schools are located in Birmingham and Dudley local authorities. Six of the schools are academy converters and three are sponsor-led academies. Two of the schools were judged inadequate prior to joining the trust and one required improvement. The remaining six schools were all judged as good.

The trust was established in 2015, with Jervoise, Wychall and The Bromley-Pensnett Primary Schools joining the trust. The trust then expanded, with one more school joining in 2015/16 and four in 2016/17. The most recent school to join was Princethorpe Junior School in March 2019.

The trust's schools vary in size from just below 200 pupils in Beechwood Church of England Primary School to around 900 pupils in Audley Primary School.

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the trust is well above that found nationally. All the schools are located in areas of high deprivation.

The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above the national figure. The proportion of pupils who require support for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is also above the national figure. Fewer than the national proportion have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The proportion of pupils with these characteristics varies considerably between schools.

Beechwood Church of England Primary School is part of the Diocese of Worcester.

A financial notice to improve (FNtI) was issued to the trust by the Education and Skills Funding Agency in July 2017. The conditions in the notice were met and the FNtI was lifted in August 2018.

The trust board is made up of 11 trustees, including a representative of Worcester Diocesan Academies Trust. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight and performance of the trust and its schools. The trust makes use of external advisers to support its schools.

Main findings

- Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent inspections, are as follows:
 - six schools are judged to be good
 - two schools are judged to require improvement
 - one school is yet to be inspected since joining the trust. Its predecessor school was judged to be inadequate.
- A strong collegiate and collaborative approach comes through all aspects of the trust's work. Trustees and staff at all levels express clear and consistent messages about the trust's vision and ethos. Leaders share a collective responsibility for all pupils, schools and staff well-being. A number of leaders expressed this by saying that, 'the trust is only as strong as the weakest link'.
- Trustees provide the central team and school leaders with a good balance of support and challenge. They hold schools to account through regular external reviews and trust improvement board meetings. When things have not gone according to plan, trustees take steps to ensure mistakes cannot be repeated. Through the achievement, support and scrutiny committee, trustees have oversight of the progress of groups of pupils, especially those who are looked after or vulnerable. There is clear evidence that the trust will take decisive action if schools are not responding rapidly enough to support.
- In August 2018, the trust board improved lines of accountability by restructuring local governance arrangements. These have not worked in the way they were

intended to and further changes are planned. It is proposed that local links with parents and school communities will be strengthened through newly formed academy councils.

- School leaders have confidence in the trust's central team and each other to provide the support that they need to make improvements in their schools. Colleagues see themselves collectively as 'the trust'. Together, they shape the direction of the trust by moving away from focusing on individual schools to looking at the trust as a whole. The trust does not generally tell schools how they should do things. However, by sharing effective practice, trust schools are adopting increasingly similar approaches. Often schools use national research and small-scale evidence-based trials as a basis for developments. A small number of 'non-negotiables' apply to all schools, for example the use of a common calculation policy in mathematics. There are also shared testing and assessment arrangements. These allow the trust to collate and analyse data on a trust-wide basis, allocating resources according to need.
- Senior leaders from each school meet together regularly and now have a good oversight of strengths and weaknesses across the trust. Together, leaders make decisions about the best way to support each other. They use strengths from other schools and external services effectively. This approach enables leaders to respond rapidly when a need arises and reduces the risk of a school in difficulty being missed.
- On a trust-wide basis, pupils' attainment and progress are below national averages in almost all measures. However, except for reading at the end of key stage 2, data indicate that outcomes have improved or previous improvements have been maintained. This includes at the end of early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2. Everyone is very clear that 'standards are not there yet' and improving outcomes for all pupils is a top priority. While at a trust-wide level there have been improvements, there remains volatility in how well pupils are achieving in individual schools. This is partly due to a history of staffing instability in some schools. The trust has largely addressed the staffing issues. Most schools now have a permanent staff team in place.
- Pupils' achievement in reading declined at the end of key stage 2 in the summer of 2019. The trust's schools are taking rapid and appropriate action to address this issue. This work links closely to a trust-wide focus on developing pupils' vocabulary and language acquisition. These changes are supported by relevant staff training and include a focus on pupils with SEND. It is too soon to see the impact of this work at trust level.
- Across the trust, there has been a focus on strengthening the quality of pupils' writing. This has resulted in improved attainment in writing in most trust schools at the end of key stage 2. Attainment is now in line with the national figures at the end of key stage 1.

- Clear, strategic decisions by trustees and leaders are improving provision for vulnerable pupils and raising the expectations of all who work with them. For example, the trust has increased the level of specialist SEND expertise available to its schools. Pupils receiving support for SEND are making stronger progress, although this is not yet the case for pupils who have an EHC plan. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are inconsistent and remain too low at the end of key stage 2. All trust schools have had at least one review to look at how they use pupil premium funding to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Some of the resulting plans are not sufficiently focused on the needs of individual cohorts to have the required impact.
- School improvement leaders are strengthening the curriculum offered across the trust. They are focusing on how children learn so that the curriculum can build on children's existing knowledge and skills. Pupils with SEND are fully included in all aspects of the curriculum. Pupils' personal development is well supported by the trust. All pupils have access to a range of opportunities as a result of the 'pupil and parent guarantee'. Opportunities include access to a range of visits and residential trips, learning a musical instrument, performing to an external audience and a variety of sporting activities.
- The number of pupils who are persistently absent from school has reduced but it remains almost double the national rate. Schools are working together to share effective practice. A few have shown a considerable improvement in attendance but this is not consistent. The trust is working with its schools to identify those strategies which are most effective. For example, all schools now provide support for families through attendance clinics, home visits and early help referrals. Attendance information is monitored termly by the trustees but more needs to be done to secure further improvements in overall levels of attendance.
- Rates of exclusion in many of the schools are high. Often this can be linked to a change in a school's culture, but trustees acknowledge that this cannot be seen as an excuse. Trustees and the central team do not take the exclusion of pupils lightly. All exclusions are reported centrally and the reasons tracked. School leaders are now challenged on the actions they are taking to reduce the risk of pupils being repeatedly excluded. The trust has recently appointed an inclusion lead. Together with additional educational psychologist support, they are seeking to understand and address reasons for exclusion.
- Plans to increase the trust's capacity to support school improvement are well underway. Three school-based improvement leaders have been in post for 12–18 months. They are now taking on trust-wide roles. Their impact can be seen on the trust's work to further develop the curriculum. There is also clear evidence of effective coaching and peer-to-peer support. This is helping to ensure that there is a common approach to planning and high expectations across all schools. The trust has recently appointed a new tier of 'home grown' school improvement practitioners. They will be working across schools in the key areas of literacy, mathematics, curriculum design, early years and enrichment. During the

summary evaluation, a full-time director of school improvement was appointed to lead the next stage in the trust's development.

- The trust's approach to sharing effective practice across schools enables leaders to identify talent and develop and retain staff. Increasingly, staff from trust schools work together to coach and support each other. There are a wide range of networks in place to enable staff at all levels to share effective practice and learn together. These include networks for SEND, safeguarding, early years, deputy headteachers and teaching assistants. During the summary evaluation, many staff said how much they enjoy working in the trust and have a renewed enthusiasm for teaching and a 'spring in [their] step'.
- The trust has a well-organised and effective approach to matters of finance, data protection, risk and estate management. There are clear systems in place, such as regular audits and assessments. These help to improve pupils' physical safety and the quality of the environment, and ensure services provide value for money. Leaders described the FNI as a positive catalyst for change, leading to the restructuring of the trust board and central teams. This resulted in greater oversight and clarity of governance. There is now an effective synergy in place, using the skills of the central team to enable school staff to focus on issues of school improvement.

Safeguarding

The trust takes its responsibilities for safeguarding seriously. Trust and school leaders have created a culture where keeping pupils safe is central to everyone's work. The trust works across two safeguarding children partnerships. Leaders share key messages from each partnership with all of the schools. Across the trust, there is a strong network of designated safeguarding leads. They work together to share training and expertise. Policies are up to date and meet requirements. Individual schools adapt documents to reflect their individual circumstances and localities. Safeguarding was effective in all the inspections of trust schools.

Schools within the trust each have their own 'children's safeguarding board'. Pupils work together to help make their school environment safer. For example, they lead assemblies and undertake risk assessments alongside adults. Recent projects include a focus on road safety and discouraging parents from smoking when they pick their children up at the end of the day. Pupils from across the trust meet together to share their work.

All staff and trustees have regular safeguarding training. This is to ensure that they know the issues that pupils might be facing and how to report any concerns. Trustees check the effectiveness of safeguarding systems through both internal and external reviews. The trust has developed a vulnerability audit. Leaders use this to target specific training or pastoral support within schools. The trust and its schools follow safer recruitment practices.

Recommendations

- Embed the trust's approach to the curriculum so that all pupils benefit from a broad range of opportunities, leading to academic achievement and strong personal development. This is to help pupils achieve success in their future lives.
- Improve pupils' outcomes further so that all groups of pupils achieve well, particularly in reading.
- Further strengthen school improvement across the trust by continuing to build capacity within schools and the central team.
- Continue to improve pupils' attendance. In particular, focus on reducing the high levels of pupils who are persistently absent from school.
- Continue to analyse reasons for exclusion and challenge school leaders to reduce the proportion of pupils excluded from school.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Crooks
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

Trust schools inspected during summer 2019 as part of stage 1 – section 5 inspections

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade 2019
Audley Primary School	Birmingham	October 2016	Predecessor school: Good	Requires Improvement
Beechwood Church of England Primary School	Dudley	July 2016	Predecessor school: Inadequate	Good
Hob Green Primary School	Dudley	November 2016	Predecessor school: Good	Good

Trust schools inspected during summer 2019 as part of stage 1 – section 8 or monitoring inspections

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade 2019
Princethorpe Infant School	Birmingham	October 2016	Predecessor school: Good	Good
The Oval School	Birmingham	September 2016	Predecessor school: Good	Good

Other trust schools

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent Inspection grade
Jervoise School	Birmingham	October 2015	Predecessor school: Good	Good
Princethorpe Junior School	Birmingham	March 2019	Predecessor school: inadequate	n/a
The Bromley-Pensnett Primary School	Dudley	October 2015	Predecessor school: Requires Improvement	Good
Wychall Primary School	Birmingham	October 2015	Predecessor school: Good	Requires Improvement