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Amanda Fewkes
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Dear Mrs Fewkes

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of The Fen Rivers Academy

Following my visit with John Mitcheson, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), to your school on 29 and 30 June 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in June 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. We discussed the impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in our evaluation.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The trust's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer of the Catch 22 multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and

the director of children's services for Norfolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Varney
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 29 and 30 June 2021

Context

The previous substantive headteacher left the school shortly after the section 5 inspection. Two periods of interim headship followed before the current headteacher took up her post in February 2020, three weeks before the first COVID-19 restrictions came into force. There have been several other staff changes since the section 5 inspection, including the executive principal who has strategic responsibility for the school. The deputy headteacher was promoted from within the school staff and took up his post in the summer term 2020.

Several governors have left over time and the governing body is now very small, with only three members remaining. An improvement board, chaired by the local authority, has been in place since November 2019 to supplement the governance of the school.

Although the school is registered for pupils from four to 16 years, it currently only has pupils from Year 3 to Year 7. Leaders plan to 'grow from the bottom', as each year group moves through the school, rather than admitting pupils directly into Year 8 and above. Extensive building works are ongoing to the vacant school immediately next door to the school's current site. The school will extend onto this site in phases as the works are completed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a big impact on the school's plans for improvement. All pupils at the school have an education, health and care plan because of their social, emotional and mental health needs. Many pupils' mental health has been notably adversely affected by the pandemic. Meeting pupils' needs in this respect has taken up much of leaders' time since March 2020.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

One of leaders' key priorities since the previous inspection has been improving behaviour. They have focused well on ensuring that there is a positive approach to managing pupils' behaviour. Staff have been trained in the use of trauma-informed approaches so that they routinely look for and consider the reasons why pupils behave in the ways that they do. Responses to undesirable behaviours are then based on this understanding. This approach is now well established throughout the school.

Since the section 5 inspection, all school staff have been trained in the use of positive handling techniques. They have been trained to use physical restraint techniques as a very last resort, to the minimum extent possible, and only when absolutely necessary. This training has had a positive impact, and the number and frequency of physical interventions have reduced. However, leaders recognise that

the number of physical restraint incidents remains too high and needs to reduce further.

The number of fixed-period exclusions has also reduced. There are fewer incidents of staff being hurt by pupils. Some staff have high expectations of pupils, in terms of how they behave. While they understand the reasons why pupils sometimes behave in undesirable ways, they balance this with an expectation that pupils will follow the school's rules. They make clear that there are consequences of not following the rules. Some staff have not developed this balance between understanding and expectations well enough, and their expectations are too low.

The section 5 inspection raised concerns about the school's use of 'calm rooms'. These rooms were used to detain pupils when their behaviour became very difficult to manage. There has been a cultural shift and this practice has ceased. The rooms concerned have now been re-purposed. They are no longer used punitively, but instead they are used as therapeutic rooms that pupils choose to come to when they want time and space to calm themselves.

Leaders expect all pupils to attend school full time and most pupils do. Leaders take strong action if pupils' attendance starts to drop. Some pupils' attendance has improved enormously, so they now attend well when previously their attendance was very poor. Pupils attend part time when they join the school and their attendance is gradually increased to full time over a period of a few weeks. A few pupils have alternative provision in place that involves remote delivery of the curriculum. These measures are short-term and are in response to the pupils' specific needs.

Leaders' attention has, unavoidably, been largely focused on managing the demands of the pandemic over the last 15 months. However, leaders have also developed a more strategic approach, alongside these operational demands. Improving the quality of the curriculum has been the main thrust of this strategic approach. The school now has a curriculum in place for all subjects in the national curriculum. There is an increased emphasis on academic learning. This was not the case previously.

The curriculum needs further development. Leaders have not yet identified the most crucial knowledge and skills that pupils need to remember. The small steps that build to larger pieces of knowledge, or more complicated skills, have not been thought through for all subjects. The trust's central leaders have given school leaders help with developing the curriculum, but more direct support is needed.

There are notable weaknesses in the teaching of early reading. Leaders have not established and implemented a systematic approach to assessing pupils' knowledge of phonics and how well they apply this knowledge in their reading. Leaders have selected a systematic synthetic phonics programme but this is yet to be implemented throughout the school. Three members of staff have received training

in this method but most staff have not. This means that they are ill-equipped to teach the phonics curriculum. The school does not yet have appropriate reading books that are well-matched to the chosen phonics programme.

Leaders took this issue very seriously when it was raised by inspectors. By the end of the inspection, all teaching staff had been booked onto training courses for the school's chosen phonics programme, and leaders had placed a substantial order for reading books matched to the school's chosen phonics scheme.

Leaders have improved the quality of the environment, indoors and outdoors. Classrooms are now fit for purpose. The corridors have displays reflecting the school's approach and ethos. The main outside area now has playground markings and basketball hoops. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to make the outside areas attractive and appealing learning environments.

Pupils say that they like their school. They told inspectors that this school is much better for them than other schools they have been to. Staff told inspectors that they like working at the school. They said that it has improved under the current leadership and that they now feel much better supported. They said that the staff team is now stronger and there is always someone there to support them during challenging times.

- Leaders should take action to improve the quality of early reading by ensuring that:
 - all pupils' knowledge and understanding of phonics, and their ability to apply that knowledge, are thoroughly assessed and gaps identified accurately
 - the school's chosen phonics scheme is implemented systematically and in full
 - reading books that pupils are given to read are closely matched to the phonics they have been taught.

Additional support

The local authority offered support to the trust soon after the section 5 inspection. This offer was taken up by trust leaders, and the local authority has provided strong support to the school since autumn 2019. A lead adviser from the local authority meets regularly with school leaders, providing support and challenge. The local authority adviser chairs an improvement group that has met monthly throughout the pandemic. The school has struggled to recruit governors, and the governing body is too small to be fully effective. The improvement group has filled this gap in governance.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, senior leaders from the multi-academy trust, the chair of the local governing body, teachers and other staff, and a representative

of the local authority. Some of these meetings took place virtually using video conferencing. Inspectors spoke with pupils and listened to them read. They observed pupils during break times. Inspectors checked the school's single central record of pre-employment checks.