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17 September 2021

Catherine Cusick
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Dear Dr Cusick

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Notley High School and Braintree Sixth Form

Following my visit with Cindy Impey, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), Maureen Su, HMI, John Mitcheson, HMI and Kathryn Herlock, Ofsted Inspector (OI) to your school on 6 and 7 July 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 February 2020. 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 arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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 governing body, the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the Bridge Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Marc White
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 6 July 2021 and 7 July 2021

Context

There have been considerable staffing changes since the previous inspection. The headteacher left in February 2020. A new acting head of school and executive headteacher have been appointed. The assistant headteacher has been promoted to deputy headteacher, and one assistant headteacher has been appointed. There are new subject leaders in business and computing, mathematics and modern foreign languages. A new head of sixth form has also taken up post.

The school joined the Bridge Academy Trust in April 2021 following the closure of the North Essex Multi-Academy Trust. The executive headteacher is now also the deputy chief executive officer of the trust.

Following the merger with the Bridge Academy Trust, there have been significant changes to governance. Alongside the new board of trustees, there is a local governing committee. Most members of the previous local governing body have been appointed to this committee. A new chair of the local governing committee has also been appointed.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Issues of bullying, including routine name-calling, that were identified in the previous inspection, are being tackled systemically. Leaders now have a better system for recording and reviewing individual instances of bullying. This is allowing staff to intervene to deal with situations before they escalate. Incidents of bullying are reducing from the very high numbers identified in the previous inspection. Almost all pupils who spoke to inspectors said that they would report concerns and feel that staff are getting better at spotting and dealing with incidents of bullying.

Leaders have established a new behaviour system and trained staff and pupils in this system. Leaders are now recording incidents of pupils' behaviour and acting to address issues quickly. Behaviour is improving. The majority of pupils and staff would agree. However, a small but significant proportion of staff feel that leaders do not support them to manage behaviour well. Almost all pupils who spoke to inspectors stated that behaviour has improved significantly. However, pupils did tell inspectors that when there was some poorer behaviour, it was often because some staff are inconsistent and unfair in how they use the behaviour system.

The inadequacies in safeguarding systems have also been tackled well by leaders. Leaders have improved the systems and processes for recording and monitoring the information about pupils' safety and well-being, including those who do not attend school routinely. Leaders liaise well with parents, carers, alternative providers and external agencies when they have concerns about individual pupils' attendance.

Leaders use this information effectively and act on safeguarding concerns appropriately, including making timely referrals to appropriate agencies. Staff are confident in identifying and reporting safeguarding concerns. Pupils are confident that staff act appropriately to keep them safe. Leaders have been proactive in establishing what pupils and staff know about sexual harassment and sexual violence. They plan to use this information to make changes to the curriculum to develop this knowledge further. The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

However, despite these improvements in safeguarding, leaders are not using all information at their disposal to make a meaningful difference to a core of harder-to-reach pupils in each year group, many of whom are disadvantaged or have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These pupils are not accessing high-quality education, because their behaviour and/or attendance are inhibiting this. Incidents of poor behaviour and fixed-term exclusion remain too high for these pupils. Leaders are not working collectively to review and act on all information that they have at their disposal to understand and address the deep-seated issues that prevent these pupils accessing the curriculum in a positive and effective way.

The special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) has a very accurate view on the quality of provision for pupils with SEND. Since the previous inspection, the SENDCo has worked more closely with middle leaders and teachers to develop their understanding of pupils' needs. However, teachers do not always use the learning plans that are in place for pupils with SEND. As a result, the needs of pupils with SEND are not being routinely met in lessons.

The quality of the curriculum is improving. Leaders have developed new curriculum plans since the previous inspection. In most subjects, plans identify the knowledge that pupils should learn and have ordered this in a logical sequence. However, many curriculum leaders are new to their roles and are only just starting work on implementing their new curriculums. The pandemic has also delayed leaders' ability to check and implement some of these plans. The trust, since its arrival in April, has put in place mentoring and additional training opportunities to begin to help new leaders develop their expertise, and to try to speed up the implementation of the new curriculum. However, this work is still in its infancy and does not cover all subject areas. In particular, not enough staff are well trained in implementing the new personal, social, health and economic education curriculum. As a result, this curriculum is not supporting pupils as well as it should.

Leaders have made significant inroads into the areas identified in the previous inspection, in spite of the challenges of the pandemic. Governance under the new trust has improved significantly. Leaders are being routinely challenged about the information that they are presenting, and their sometimes overly generous view about the quality of provision in the school. There remains a small but significant number of parents and staff that are concerned about behaviour, SEND and leadership communication. The trust is working to address these concerns and

recognises the importance of listening to stakeholders as it continues to address the weaknesses in the school's provision.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that leaders use all information that they have, and work collectively, to understand and better support the needs of a core of pupils who do not attend or behave well, most notably those who are disadvantaged and those with SEND, so that they attend, behave and achieve well
- continue to work with staff, parents and pupils, where concerns arise, to develop a better understanding of the school's weaknesses and to identify where systems and processes are not working effectively.

Additional support

The school has benefited from help and challenge from the multi-academy trust. This has rightly focused on strengthening the school's leadership and helping curriculum leaders develop their expertise. The level of challenge by trustees since the new board of trustees was appointed has improved.

The school has been supported by a national leader of education to help identify the actions needed to tackle the school's weaknesses. Leaders have also worked with a specialist leader of education to establish the new behaviour system.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, the acting head of school, other senior leaders, the multi-academy trust chief executive officer and representatives of those responsible for governance.

Inspectors visited lessons, spoke to pupils about their learning and examined a sample of pupils' work. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour when visiting lessons and at break and lunchtime. They analysed 264 responses to Ofsted Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, and 247 free-text responses. They considered the responses of 117 staff to an Ofsted survey.