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12 September 2022

Soheila Mathison
Headteacher
Thomas Whitehead CofE Academy
Angels Lane
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Dear Mrs Mathison

Special measures monitoring inspection of Thomas Whitehead CofE Academy

Following my visit to your school on 12 and 13 July 2022, 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 most 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 September 2021. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

This was the second routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. I discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

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

The school continues to be inadequate. Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered the evidence, I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Diocese of St Albans multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of St Albans, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Kristian Hewitt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 12 and 13 July 2022

Context

Since the previous full inspection, in September 2021, there have been significant changes to the leadership and governance arrangements. Following the resignation of the previous headteacher and all members of the governing body, leaders of the trust took immediate and decisive action to secure stable leadership in the school. An experienced interim headteacher was appointed in October 2021.

A new local governing body has been put in place. This is made up of members who have been selected to provide a range of skills and expertise to support improvement in the school. Clear and established working practices are ensuring that there is robust support, monitoring and accountability in place. Leaders, governors and trustees are realistic about the weaknesses in the school and continue to evaluate these openly and accurately.

Leaders have been united in securing sustainable change in the culture of the school and the quality of education. To ensure the effective continuation of this strategy, a new substantive headteacher has been successfully appointed to start in September 2022.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Leaders are working collaboratively to evaluate the provision in school accurately and realistically. The use of both internal and external checking systems ensures there is no risk of complacency or bias. Leaders continue to reflect on the course of action taken to bring about the best possible change for pupils in the school. Of note is leaders' commitment to capture pupils' voices and opinions as improvements are made. This is making sure that actions lead to a difference being made to pupils' experiences.

The school development plan aligns clearly with the areas of weakness identified at the previous inspection. It is precise, and resources have been allocated to ensure identified actions can be achieved. There are specified time frames to ensure governors can effectively monitor progress of specific agreed priorities. Governors check what leaders tell them and find out for themselves to ensure the information they receive is accurate. Where progress towards specific individual priorities has not been evaluated as swift enough, governors have asked why. This is ensuring that governors know the school well and are focusing on the aspects which will improve the effectiveness of the school.

Leaders are committed to implementing a curriculum that is ambitious for pupils in the school. Although this is at an early stage, leaders and other staff have considered a wide range of experiences that will contribute to the learning of pupils during their time in the school. Leaders are, however, taking a measured approach when making changes, to ensure that newly implemented approaches are working and effective.

Leaders have made determined decisions to adapt the curriculum, ensuring the intent is clear and detailed. This has already transformed some elements of the curriculum, and it

is evident that this is engaging pupils more fully in their learning. For example, this is evident in pupils' writing and speaking in English lessons. Teachers and support staff have also had relevant and timely training to help them to implement the curriculum. In general, this is supporting teachers to design lessons that are better at supporting pupils to learn new knowledge in manageable stages. Staff are also beginning to routinely encourage pupils to recall the knowledge they are learning, to help ensure this is embedded in their long-term memories.

Improvements to the reading curriculum, especially in phonics lessons, are making sure pupils have regular opportunities to learn and rehearse the important sounds they need to read. The scheme being used is at an early stage of implementation. As a result, staff delivering the lessons do not have consistently secure confidence or expertise. Pupils need more reliable high-quality opportunities to practise their phonics knowledge in these lessons. Pupils do not always practise reading from books that match their phonics knowledge. This is currently limiting the degree to which they develop fluency and confidence with their reading.

Leaders and teachers understand there is more to do to make sure pupils' experience of the curriculum is consistent and effective. This includes the ongoing development of staff's subject knowledge and strengthening adults' understanding of how best to adapt learning to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders' intentions to maximise meaningful learning opportunities in the early years are not yet fully realised. Leaders are keen for adults to model quality interaction and use of spoken language, to best prepare children for Year 1 and beyond. However, adults do not consistently exploit opportunities to talk to and question children effectively during their learning and play.

Safeguarding was reported to be effective at the previous inspection. Evidence collected during this monitoring inspection indicates that this continues to be the case.

There are positive features in the early actions that leaders and managers are taking to improve the school. Leaders up to this point have taken swift and decisive action. A considered approach to rapid improvement also means leaders are prioritising taking appropriate time to evolve the quality of the curriculum and avoiding rushing important changes. Careful consideration for the succession planning of leadership, including investing in strong subject leadership throughout the school, indicates that the capacity for further improvement should continue to build.

Leaders have been considerate of the specific pressures on staff in the school. Evidence gathered during inspection demonstrates that staff are united in a vision to move forward and improve the quality of education for pupils at Thomas Whitehead. Staff feel empowered, well supported and invested in to complete this important work. They see the benefit this is already having for pupils in the school.

Additional support

The trust has invested significant support. Regular training, monitoring and evaluation has been facilitated by the education director. This has contributed both to an accurate understanding of progress being made and the growing capacity for improvement, such as the developing understanding of subject leaders. The chief executive officer (CEO) and members of the board of trustees have maintained close oversight of developments. This has ensured leaders have been held to account.

Leaders have made use of external audits to evaluate their work. This has included the support of a local authority school improvement adviser and an independent school improvement partner. Leaders have made effective use of the feedback this has provided them with.

Evidence

The inspector observed what was happening in the school, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other leaders in the school, the CEO and the education director of the multi-academy trust. The inspector spoke with pupils and a range of staff from across the school. The inspector also met with six members of the local governing body, including the chair of governors, who is also the director of the trust.