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13 September 2022

David Bishop
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Bishop

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of The Spires Academy

Following my visit with John Craig, Ofsted Inspector (OI), to your school on 20 July 2022, 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 October 2021. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

This was the second routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in our 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 the serious weaknesses designation.

The trust'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 or equivalent of the Catch22 multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for West Northamptonshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Innes-Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 20 July 2022

Context

There have been significant changes in the leadership and staffing of the school since the last inspection. These changes have proved challenging for leaders of the trust to put in place. Several staff have left the school, including the headteacher and an interim headteacher. A new interim headteacher was appointed in June 2022. New senior leaders and teaching staff have been appointed to take up their posts in September 2022. The chair of governors and other members of the governing body have recently resigned their roles. Trustees aim to establish a new local governing body for the school in the near future.

COVID-19 has continued to challenge the work of leaders to improve the school. Staff and pupil absences have caused further disruption to pupils' education.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Leaders have taken effective action to improve the aspects of the school that were judged to have serious weaknesses at the previous inspection. Trustees have improved safeguarding arrangements. Safeguarding is effective. Staff have received training to recognise when a pupil may be at risk. Key staff have been trained to a higher level. A dedicated safeguarding team tracks safeguarding concerns and procedures closely. Daily staff briefings make sure that any concerns about pupils are shared and followed up in a timely manner.

Records for safeguarding are now scrutinised carefully by the safeguarding team. School and trust leaders frequently check the records to ensure they are accurate and complete. Leaders are aware that there are still some aspects of safeguarding which require closer oversight of leaders. For example, staff are provided with details about individual pupils, including support plans and risk assessments where appropriate. However, some support plans for pupils are still not reviewed promptly enough. Staff or pupils may be put at risk if plans do not reflect recent changes in behaviour.

Staff training to manage pupils' behaviour is having a positive impact. Staff are trained in the use of physical restraint. Staff told inspectors that they now feel safer because they know the correct actions to take when it is necessary to use physical restraint. Training has focused on the importance of staff understanding and using appropriate de-escalation techniques. The number of staff who are injured by pupils' violent behaviour remains high. It is reducing over time as staff become more confident in using the new approach. Identified staff have been trained by leaders from the trust to deliver further staff training in September 2022. They aim to ensure the approach is used effectively and consistently to protect staff and assure pupils' safety.

Leaders recognise that expectations for pupils' behaviour have not been high enough in the past. Work has begun to raise expectations. Leaders have revised behaviour management procedures. They are in the process of making sure that all staff, pupils, parents and carers understand what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. For example, there is a zero-tolerance approach to pupils who behave in a violent or aggressive manner. This policy is beginning to have a positive impact. The number of violent or aggressive incidents has reduced. However, not all staff fully understand the rationale for this policy. Leaders have planned training to support staff further.

Leaders are tackling the complex concerns relating to the welfare of staff. Staff now have access to external advice and support for their mental health and well-being. They told inspectors that they are better informed about pupils. As a result, staff feel more equipped to plan for and manage pupils' individual behavioural needs. They appreciate that they can now work in 'class staff teams' where they can better support each other. Even so, despite leaders' ongoing actions, the welfare of staff remains a high priority. Some staff are still harmed physically by pupils. Some experience verbal abuse. Some staff feel that they are 'thrown in at the deep end' with curriculum planning and provision. Leaders know that there is still much to do to ensure that all staff feel valued and well supported.

Changes to the curriculum are in the very early days. Leaders are aware that the quality of education now needs urgent priority for improvement. Disruption to learning caused by staff changes and COVID-19 has hampered efforts to improve this aspect of weakness. Some strategies have been started but then stop when staff leave. Staff do not know who the current leaders of the curriculum are. There is no clear strategic overview of the curriculum. A scheme of work for subjects other than English and maths has helped staff to understand what they need to teach. However, staff have not received training in how to implement the scheme of work effectively. Some subjects are not planned or taught in a logical sequence. There has been little improvement to the curriculum since the last inspection.

Some staff have received training for phonics. There is no strategic overview of the teaching for phonics and early reading. Limited work has taken place to make sure that the books pupils read match the sounds they know. Some creative approaches have been introduced to promote a love of reading. Not all teachers value these opportunities. For example, pupils are encouraged to take time daily to 'drop everything and read', yet not all classes take part in this initiative.

The school's plans for development accurately identify the areas to address weaknesses. However, some actions to improve the quality of education need refining because of the turbulence in staffing. Leaders are currently revising these plans to focus on the most urgent actions needed to develop the school's curriculum.

Additional support

The multi-academy trust has provided the school with necessary financial support. This has been effective in recruiting staff and providing funding for extra adult support for pupils when needed. The executive principal works closely with the interim headteacher to discuss school improvement priorities. Other leaders of the trust have provided pertinent training and coaching to school staff. For example, trust leaders for safeguarding and personal development and behaviour have provided bespoke training to staff. The training is improving consistency in safeguarding procedures and the management of pupils' behaviour. Trust leaders recognise that leaders and staff now require focused and well-planned training and support to improve the quality of education.

The local authority has completed an audit of the school's safeguarding policies and procedures. Leaders of the school and trust appreciate the thoroughness of this process. They value the acknowledgement of the improvements the trust and school have made to the culture of safeguarding.

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim headteacher, the executive principal, designated leaders for safeguarding, other senior leaders, the interim multi-academy trust chief executive officer, the chair of trustees, pupils and staff.