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Ash Jacobs  
Principal  
Dixons Unity Academy  
Whingate Road  
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Dear Mr Jacobs

## **Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Dixons Unity Academy**

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 6 December 2023, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in March 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. I met with a range of school leaders with responsibilities for key aspects of the school's work. I also met with the chief executive officer (CEO), executive leaders and members of the trust board. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also visited lessons and talked to groups of pupils. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

**Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as having serious weaknesses.**

**The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation**

Since the last inspection, leaders have made a number of significant changes and appointments. New subject leaders are in post in mathematics, physical education (PE) and business and information technology. An assistant principal has been appointed with responsibility for alternative provision. The capacity of the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) team has increased. A new special educational needs coordinator has been appointed as part of an expanded inclusion team. The school has appointed additional staff to the pastoral team and added capacity to the attendance team.

The trust has established an academy improvement board. The board is chaired by a trustee and includes representatives from other multi-academy trusts and from the local authority. This board has been established to bring external support and challenge to the academy improvement process.

You, in partnership with colleagues from the trust, have carried out much work to improve the quality of education. At the time of the previous inspection, you were new to post and had little time to effect change. Since March 2023, the pace of improvement has accelerated. New subject leaders are working with their teams to enhance subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise. Subject leaders from the trust are working with school leaders to model effective teaching. Pupils are taking part in whole year group sessions to recall important knowledge and better learn new vocabulary. In addition, a wide range of interventions are in place to support pupils' reading. While these changes remain relatively new, there are demonstrable signs of substantive school improvement.

Some aspects of the curriculum remain more difficult to fully address. The school is not able to offer a design and technology curriculum that would match the ambitions of the national curriculum. However, you are seeking creative ways to add further curriculum breadth. The PE department is launching a health and fitness curriculum in Years 7 and 8 which will teach pupils about nutrition and healthy diet. The art department will incorporate aspects of 3D design within its curriculum. While more needs to be done, these actions show a continued aim to widen the curriculum.

You have shown a particularly strong commitment to improving the quality of education for pupils with SEND. With strong support from the trust, you have increased the capacity and expertise of the SEND team. New leaders are making improvements in how promptly and effectively needs are identified. Stronger links are being built with parents and carers of pupils with SEND. The SEND team is making sure that teachers are more acutely aware of the needs of pupils with SEND. The needs of these pupils are foregrounded in the lesson plans and assessment strategies that teachers follow in their lessons. Training and guidance is being provided to better model how to support pupils with SEND. While this work is in its early stages and refinement is needed, there is a growing consistency in the strategies being used by teachers.

Your work to support pupils with SEND is being complemented by action to enhance the quality of alternative provision. Much of this provision involves pupils with SEND. A new leader is providing much stronger oversight of this provision. Your team has put systems

in place to check behaviour, safety and the quality of education. You have reduced the number of pupils accessing alternative provision. The school is planning to introduce its own alternative provision on site from January 2024. The aim is to develop a holistic curriculum to address the needs of pupils, with additional support from counsellors and therapists. There are some signs of improving attendance and lower suspensions for pupils accessing alternative provision, albeit from a low starting point.

You are taking important action to strengthen relationships with your local community. You have made the school a community hub, providing direct support for essential resources and signposting families to external services to get them the help that they need. Staff have reached out to families at summer and Christmas fairs. Staff make regular calls to parents to build stronger bonds and overcome some of the barriers to pupils' education that have intensified in the post-COVID period. The trust's decision to set up local academy ambassadors aims to refresh the community purpose of governance to build stronger links between home, the community and school.

One of the biggest barriers to pupils experiencing an acceptable quality of education remains poor rates of attendance. This currently stands at 82% for all pupils. You have increased the capacity of the attendance team. The team is providing a range of support for pupils and families, including making a high number of home visits. High rates of suspension for poor behaviour add to the problem. You remain determined not to lower rates of suspension by lowering expectations of behaviour. There are signs of improvement for some pupils. For example, pupils at alternative provision are attending more often. Once again, this is from a low base. This remains one of your main priorities, as without better attendance, pupils will not benefit from the improvements being made.

Pupils at key stage 3 talk positively about the impact of recent changes. They value their learning and feel that their voices are heard. Pupils at key stage 4 are less positive. While the pandemic has more greatly disrupted secondary education for these pupils, they continue to be concerned about the quality of their education and behaviour. They feel that their learning is disrupted by absence of specialist staff in subjects such as science and Spanish. While pupils in Year 11 in 2023 had little time to benefit from the improvements you and the trust have made, their progress was significantly below that seen nationally across a number of subjects.

New strategies to improve the curriculum, SEND provision and attendance take time to show impact. However, the pace and purpose of improvement are clear. You have led significant improvement action in a short space of time. Executive members of the trust, and trustees, have provided extensive support. This has provided additional staffing capacity in important areas. New layers of oversight have been brought in to track the improvement journey and offer stronger support and challenge. You and your colleagues are taking purposeful action to improve the school. Staff training and coaching are enhancing staff knowledge and the expertise of curriculum leaders. The impact of this work may be difficult to discern at this point, but it is clear that the improvement process is gaining significant traction.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO of the Dixons Academies Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Leeds. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley  
**Senior His Majesty's Inspector**