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Stephen Brownlow
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Dear Stephen Brownlow

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Gospel Oak School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 5 March 2024, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2022.

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 the vice-principals, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, the chair of the local governing board and two trustees the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The principal was not in school at the time of the inspection. I also observed pupils arriving at school, visited lessons, observed breaktimes and lunchtimes and talked to pupils and staff informally throughout the day. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Gospel Oak School remains inadequate and has serious weaknesses. Leaders have made insufficient progress to improve the school.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

There have been significant changes to leadership since the previous monitoring inspection in May 2023. The executive principal who was leading the school at that time left the school in December 2023. Since September 2023, he had been working alongside a new principal. You joined the school from the trust in January 2024 to support this principal. You are now leading the school as executive principal.

There have been changes to governance since the previous inspection. Two new co-chairs of the trust took up their roles in September 2023. The previous chair of the trust is now the vice-chair and remains part of the academy interim board. There are a number of gaps in staffing in the school. Agency staff are currently filling these vacancies. This has been the case for a number of months. Eight new teaching staff have been appointed to start in the summer term, and another eight have been appointed to begin in the autumn term.

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the standard of behaviour in the school has declined. The behaviour policy is not understood well by staff or pupils. There is very little analysis of behaviour undertaken to indicate what is and is not working or where the main issues lie. Attendance is low. On the day of the monitoring inspection, it was 85%. It is around 87% this academic year so far. Persistent absence is high. Too many pupils truant from lessons.

Senior leaders have been hampered in their efforts to improve these crucial aspects of the school's work by a lack of clarity about their own roles. They have not felt empowered to take full leadership of the areas for which they are responsible, or to work effectively as a team. A sizeable number of staff have responsibilities for aspects of behaviour, attendance and safeguarding, yet they are part of separate teams. You have quickly recognised these weaknesses and have made swift changes to roles and responsibilities. This is already starting to make a positive difference to the extent to which leaders can support staff and begin to improve behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.

The pupils I spoke to during the inspection, from all year groups, talked about behaviour in negative terms. They said that some pupils have a bad attitude towards staff, walk out of lessons, do not pay attention, disrupt learning or skip lessons altogether. All of these behaviours were seen in lessons and around school during the inspection. Pupils also talked about variability from one lesson to the next, both in terms of staff's expectations and how they and their peers behave. This aspect was also evident. Some pupils expressed frustration at the negative impact this has on their own ability to learn and to achieve. These findings align with the views that you have gathered from groups of pupils this term. You have rightly identified that routines and expectations are neither well understood across the school nor well established. This lack of clarity and consistency in the management of behaviour is contributing to the poor behaviour that some pupils are displaying.

During the inspection, pupils' behaviour around the school was variable. Some walked sensibly to their lessons and arrived promptly. Some ambled, with no sense of purpose. Others ran down corridors, bumped into others or pushed each other as they walked. At breaktime and lunchtime, behaviour was generally sensible. Pupils chatted in groups. Some played football. Around 40 pupils were engaged in lively and good-natured badminton games in the sports hall. In the dining rooms, pupils followed the queuing system and mainly did as they were asked by staff.

The rate of suspensions from school is high. In the last academic year, around a quarter of pupils on roll were suspended at least once. Some were suspended repeatedly. Pupils are being suspended at a similar rate this year, and nine pupils have been permanently excluded. Some of these suspensions and exclusions reflect the serious nature of incidents that have taken place in the school. However, the high numbers are also a reflection of the unclear and ineffective approaches to managing pupils' behaviour and the lack of well-targeted intervention to support pupils with particular needs, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Until very recently, the roles of leaders and staff who are responsible for safeguarding, attendance and pastoral support have not been clearly defined. As a result, the school has not been as efficient or effective as it needs to be in supporting pupils to come to school regularly and on time. Many pupils have intransigently low attendance. Issues with attendance have not been communicated to parents clearly or in a timely way. The attendance of pupils who attend alternative provision has not been properly monitored. Pupils on part-time timetables have not had their provision reviewed regularly or formally. You have already taken sensible initial steps to begin to improve this situation. There is now clearer leadership of this aspect of the school's work. Roles and responsibilities have been defined. Staff are being supported to ask the right questions and pass on the right information to each other at the right time. As a result, you are gaining a more accurate picture of attendance. Importantly, you have taken swift action to ensure that pupils who are not attending at all are being properly monitored to check they are being safeguarded. You have reviewed all part-time timetables and some pupils are now back in school full time. You and leaders are also tackling truancy from lessons and lateness to school.

Staff have been unsettled by the number of changes to leadership that they have experienced. Some expressed frustration at the school's decline. However, some are cautiously optimistic about the future, feeling that things can move forward if they work together and with you. Crucially, following your analysis of the gaps in staffing both for the summer and autumn terms, you have been able to make a number of appointments in order to ensure that the school is properly staffed. You intend to work closely with the trust to ensure that the early career teachers who are due to start in September are supported properly so that they can be successful.

When the trust became aware of the decline in the school's work, it took action to stem the decline and to support leaders. Your appointment is a key part of this action. The trust is providing a range of support on a regular basis to improve all aspects of the

school's work. The impact of some of this work has been limited, given some of the unclear direction within the school. However, you know how you want to use this support to better effect from now on, and are starting to do so. The local governing body continues to work hard to support the school to move forward. Its members are committed to becoming involved in the school's work to improve relationships with parents.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Senior His Majesty's Inspector