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23 April 2024

Ash Jacobs  
Principal  
Dixons Unity Academy  
Whingate Road  
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West Yorkshire  
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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 19 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 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, senior leaders and staff the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. I also met with the chief executive officer (CEO) and a member of the trust board. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I visited lessons, talked to groups of pupils and looked at examples of pupils' work. I also visited the school's own recently launched on-site alternative provision, 'Connect'. 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 previous monitoring inspection, leaders have continued to build the capacity for improvement. An assistant vice-principal has been appointed to lead the school's on-site alternative provision, 'Connect'. Further changes have been made to the organisation of the pastoral team, to bring inclusion, attendance and support for the most vulnerable pupils closer together.

You, in partnership with colleagues from the trust, have continued to review and refine the school improvement process. Pupils and staff are beginning to feel the impact of the changes that are being made. Pupils feel that there is a renewed focus on learning in classrooms. In lessons visited, there was little sign of disruption to learning. Staff value the focus on professional development and school improvement. They feel that practices such as the morning meetings with whole year groups are now carried out as well at Dixons Unity as at other schools in the trust.

In late January, you opened 'Connect', the school's on-site alternative provision. You have appointed specialist staff to meet the needs of pupils based in 'Connect'. These pupils are benefiting from a curriculum that meets their needs. Pupils are accessing a wider range of academic subjects alongside vocational options. Academic support is complemented by additional support for pupils' social, emotional and special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) needs. Pupils in 'Connect' described how support is improving their attitudes to school. Increasing engagement for these pupils is reflected in improving attendance and declining suspensions. While the provision remains new, emerging signs of its impact are positive.

In lessons visited, staff remain mindful of the needs of pupils with SEND. In science and English, staff demonstrated strong subject knowledge and a sound control of a range of pedagogical approaches. Pupils demonstrated a good understanding of complex vocabulary and how a term such as patriarchy could inform an understanding of gender in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. They also explained how different writing techniques could be used to enhance a piece of descriptive writing. There is evidence that the curriculum is being implemented to more consistent effect.

At the previous monitoring inspection, you outlined plans to introduce elements of food technology at key stage 3 through health and nutrition lessons led by physical education staff. This initiative is now in place. In lessons visited, pupils were seen taking care when using the bridge and claw grips to cut vegetables neatly and safely. Pupils enjoyed these lessons. While more needs to be done to further enhance the curriculum, pupils are experiencing greater breadth at key stage 3.

You and your team have taken further steps to enhance pupils' personal development. In Year 10, pupils have taken part in careers interviews with a range of employers. This is building their self-confidence and their speaking and listening skills. You have employed staff to provide specialist support for pupils' mental health and emotional well-being. Staff appreciate the recent training on the importance of giving pupils a warm welcome at the start of each lesson. You and your team carry out extensive action to support pupils' safety and well-being.

Poor attendance remains one of the most significant barriers to the improvement process. You know that, without attending, pupils cannot benefit from the actions taken to support well-being and enrich learning. You and your team are taking significant action to improve attendance. Tutors, pastoral staff and the attendance team are working ever closer together on whole-school attendance strategies. The number of home visits to address absence has risen to over 300. Your team now uses a minibus to make home visits each morning to target those most at risk. While overall rates of absence have not fallen, there have been marked improvements for specific groups. Pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils are attending more regularly than before. This includes those pupils in 'Connect'. The proportion of pupils attending for over 95% of their time at school has improved. In addition to the support you are providing to pupils and families, you are also exploring fines and sanctions for those who do not engage. These initiatives may be relatively new, but they are gaining traction and showing improvement.

The pupils I talked to during my visits feel behaviour is improving. They believe that they can focus on their learning in lessons and feel that poor behaviour at social times is much less frequent than it was before. The introduction of 'Connect' is keeping pupils at school who were previously at risk of permanent exclusion. Overall rates of suspension for poor behaviour remain high. However, rates of suspension, particularly for the most vulnerable pupils, are beginning to decline. Absence from suspension has halved. While a lot more needs to be done, strategies are beginning to show impact.

The academy improvement board is carefully checking the improvement process. The trust continues to invest heavily in the school and in the wider community. You are building closer links with the community. The school is becoming a hub for a range of support services. You are receiving increasingly positive responses from parents and carers. The staff I talked to conveyed a sense of optimism. They value opportunities for professional development during the school day and the signs of emerging improvement in the school.

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  
**His Majesty's Inspector**