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Gary Hill
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Dear Mr Hill

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit with Ofsted Inspectors Sukhbir Farar and Lois Kelly to your school on 27–28 September 2016, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence, I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint additional newly qualified teachers before the next inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sandwell. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2014.

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching in order to raise achievement, especially in English, mathematics and science, by ensuring that:
 - teachers plan and deliver activities that have clear learning intentions and are pitched at a level of difficulty that meets the needs of all groups of students
 - students' work is accurately assessed during and after lessons so that the new work teachers then set enables all groups of students to make rapid progress
 - all marking and feedback show students exactly what they need to do to improve their work and that teachers systematically check that students quickly act upon this advice
 - teachers demand consistently high standards of work and effort from the students in their classes, especially the most-able students
 - teaching assistants receive better training in how to support less-able students who do not understand how to tackle the problems they are set
 - students have the necessary skills to solve problems and to persevere when difficulties are encountered
 - students have opportunities to develop their literacy, communication and numeracy skills in all subjects.
- Improve the support for disadvantaged students so that they make at least expected progress and that increasing numbers make more than expected progress in English and mathematics at GCSE.
- Improve the overall effectiveness of the sixth form by ensuring:
 - the statutory sixth form study programmes are fully implemented
 - good practice seen in the teaching of chemistry, biology, history and mathematics is shared with teachers of all other subjects
 - students make appropriate subject and career choices by receiving high-quality work experience, information, advice and guidance
 - the number of students leaving the sixth form before the end of their courses is reduced
 - all students who do re-sit examinations in English and mathematics at GCSE level improve their Year 11 grade.
- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that students' achievement and behaviour rapidly improve by ensuring that:
 - academy improvement plans identify all the key priorities for raising

- standards, that milestones to measure progress are challenging, specific and measurable and that methods, timescales and staff responsible for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the work of the academy are clear
- subject leaders, including the head of sixth form, have the skills to monitor, evaluate and review their work and are held to account for students' progress
 - leaders at all levels are capable of delivering improvement priorities
 - current initiatives to improve the quality of teaching are embedded so that all teachers get the help, support and guidance they need to teach all groups of students effectively and, in doing so, raise achievement
 - procedures to manage the performance of teachers are consistently applied so that underperformance is eradicated
 - teachers promote and enforce the academy's policies on behaviour and anti-bullying so that all students feel safe while in the academy
 - the curriculum more effectively supports the development of students' basic literacy and numeracy skills and meets the requirements for the teaching of religious education in Year 10
 - funds available through the pupil premium and the Year 7 catch-up funding are spent appropriately so that all students eligible for this support make better progress
 - members of the governing body hold leaders and managers to account for all aspects of the academy's performance.

An external review of governance and an external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 27 September 2016 to 28 September 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher and other senior leaders, a governor and a representative from Education Central Multi Academy Trust (ECMAT), the sponsor of the school. Inspectors met formally with a group of most-able disadvantaged pupils and a group of students from the sixth form. Inspectors listened to pupils read and carried out a review of pupils' work in mathematics jointly with the acting subject leader and a senior leader who oversees this area. A senior leader joined an inspector in observations of teaching and learning to gather evidence on the improvements made to teaching. Inspectors spoke with pupils during lessons about their work, and at breaks and lunchtime to gather their views on the school.

Context

Since the fourth monitoring inspection, the most significant change has been the departure of the previous headteacher and the appointment of the new executive headteacher. This 12-month secondment from August 2016 bases the executive headteacher at The ACE Academy for an average of four days each week. The stability in teaching staff seen at the last inspection has not continued and around 15 teachers left the school at the end of the summer term, with new teachers starting in September 2016. Teaching vacancies continue in English, mathematics and science, with the post of leader of mathematics currently advertised.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Early signs of improvement seen at the last monitoring inspection have not been sustained. In the very short time since his appointment, the new executive headteacher has formed an accurate view of the school and has a good understanding of the key challenges facing the school, including driving improvement while working within tight financial constraints. He knows the barriers that are slowing the progress towards removal of special measures and is using his considerable experience as a successful school leader to act swiftly to address these issues. However, new structures and systems have only recently been introduced so there is little evidence these changes are making any difference.

Following a recent review of the curriculum, leaders have reduced the number of teaching groups in each year group, with a subsequent increase in the numbers of pupils in some classes in English, mathematics, science and in the 'solace' curriculum. Pupils' needs are not being well met, especially those with low ability and some who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. These pupils do not receive enough support in their lessons to help them to make the same progress as others.

Senior and other leaders, including governors, are given information to enable them to monitor the progress of individual pupils and groups in all subjects. However, the amount of information presented makes it difficult for leaders to focus on the key headline figures or to monitor any early signs of differences diminishing between pupils in the school and pupils nationally. This needs to be reviewed so that it is easier to see if the recent changes are making any difference to improving progress for all pupils, but especially those who are disadvantaged, the most able and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Following a review of senior leaders' roles, a new leader has been appointed to oversee behaviour management in the school. A new behaviour policy has very recently been introduced, together with new systems to monitor behavioural incidents reported by staff. This system is very new and therefore it is difficult to see if the policy is having any impact on improving behaviour in the school. Leaders monitor the type of behavioural incident logged in each subject department and for certain times of the day. However, they do not know if the behaviour of disadvantaged pupils or those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is being managed by teachers in the same way as for other pupils in the school, or if the new policy is supporting these vulnerable pupils in managing their behaviour.

Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in English and mathematics say they are well supported and value the induction programme they are receiving. No additional NQTs should be appointed before the next inspection as there are not enough teachers who are able to demonstrate consistently effective practice to provide the necessary support and mentoring for less experienced colleagues. The executive headteacher has plans to address this through accessing a support programme delivered through Streetly Academy, judged outstanding at the last inspection.

Leadership of mathematics is weak because improvements to teaching are not happening quickly enough to make up for the weaknesses of the past and accelerate pupils' progress. The executive headteacher has plans to address this through increasing the leadership capacity in mathematics to reflect the successful structure seen in English, introduced by the previous headteacher.

Governors are failing in their duty to ensure that the school website meets current requirements. Not enough information is provided for parents on admission arrangements, the use of the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding, key stage 4 results and information on governors and their duties, including the scheme of delegation for governance functions through the multi-academy trust. Plans are now in place to redesign the school website. It was only possible to meet with one governor during the inspection and no governors' meetings had taken place this term at the time of the inspection.

Leaders' monitoring of the use and impact of the Year 7 catch-up funding shows

clear evidence that the school's strategy to improve pupils' literacy skills is making a difference. Undoubtedly the success of this initiative is due to the vision, passion and enthusiasm demonstrated by leaders of this area, who have plans to make sure more staff are trained in phonics teaching and that parents have the necessary skills to enable them to help their children.

Leadership of the sixth form continues to be a strength of the school. Immediate action is taken to address weaknesses and students talked enthusiastically about the support they receive from teachers to help them to improve. Students are provided with a rich curriculum including opportunities for enrichment, a work placement for all and effective careers information and guidance. Sixth-form students are delightful, proud members of the school and talk confidently about the difference the school is making to their lives.

Swift action was taken during the inspection to improve staff training on safeguarding, extremism and radicalisation, which had not been completed by around 30 staff. The executive headteacher took immediate action to organise training for these staff so that, by the end of the inspection, all had either completed it or were booked on training over the next few days. The single central record is thorough, meets requirements and is managed robustly.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Too much teaching is weak, causing pupils to make much slower progress than they should, especially disadvantaged pupils, the most able and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Some teaching ensures that pupils are appropriately challenged, engaged effectively and quickly learn the skills and concepts being taught as a result. However, there is too much inconsistency within subject areas as well as across the whole school.

Poor use of assessment, identified as a weakness at the last inspection, continues to be a key priority for development. Assessment is often too superficial because some teachers fail to listen carefully enough to pupils' oral responses, or focus on presentation and effort in written work. As a result, pupils are unclear about ways to improve the quality of a written response. Inspectors saw teachers reviewing learning against agreed learning objectives, or competencies, in which pupil responses were always accepted. Where teachers tested out pupils' responses through the skilled use of probing questions, pupils had to work harder and deepened their understanding as a result.

Teachers' planning sometimes fails to match work to the needs of pupils. Inspectors saw pupils using different worksheets but often there was no additional challenge in the 'more difficult' worksheets and teachers did not give enough support to pupils who were struggling to grasp the work. This impacted on behaviour because pupils quickly lost interest so chatted to friends instead. Some teachers have low expectations of standards of presentation of work and many pupils lack skills in

making notes or accurately recording information from the board because they do not receive enough support to help them to do this well.

Marking has improved and most teachers mark books in accordance with the school's marking and assessment policy, but inspectors still saw pupils' books that had not been marked for three weeks. School monitoring systems ensure that frequent and regular checks on teachers' marking are carried out. However, areas identified as needing improvement are not monitored well enough to know if teachers improve their practice or where further support and training may be required to enable this to happen. In mathematics, work is not checked to make sure it is the right level of difficulty for pupils or if they are being supported in developing fluency, reasoning and problem-solving skills. It is unclear from their work if pupils are being prepared well enough for the new GCSE in mathematics.

Numeracy development is well supported in technology. Inspectors saw pupils using their measuring and calculating skills to successfully design and build a structure.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour in lessons has declined. Many pupils have poor attitudes to learning because teachers' expectations for behaviour are inconsistent. Low-level disruption, such as talking over the teacher, is common. Some teachers allow pupils to sit with their feet up on chairs and to use inappropriate language without challenging this unacceptable behaviour.

Pupils told inspectors there is still too much bullying in the school. Not all pupils who were asked were confident that something would be done if they reported they were being bullied to a member of staff. Some even suggested they were scared to report bullying in case the bully found out and it became worse.

Attendance had improved at the last monitoring inspection but information provided to inspectors shows this has declined from 92.4% in 2014/15 to 89.1% for the last academic year, which is very low. A new attendance officer has very recently been appointed and strategies to improve attendance are being reviewed. Attendance in the sixth form is better, although still below average.

Although lesson punctuality is poor, pupils' conduct around the school and outside lessons has improved. Teachers help behaviour to improve through standing by classroom doors to 'meet and greet' pupils as they arrive for lessons. Teachers remind pupils about expectations for conduct, such as not to eat food as they walk along corridors. Pupils wear the school uniform with pride and look smart, especially sixth-form students. Pupils are polite and welcoming, for example holding doors for visitors, and are willing to share their honest views of the school.

Outcomes for pupils

2016 outcomes are indicated to be below the government's floor standard. Although key stage 4 attainment overall remains broadly similar to that of 2015, there was a sharp decline in the progress made by pupils in English. Teachers' assessments in English were woefully inaccurate because pupils' exam performance was far worse than predicted. Teachers' assessments in science were similarly inaccurate. Progress in mathematics improved slightly compared with that of 2015, but fewer than half of the cohort made the progress they should. Disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities underachieved compared with their more advantaged peers in the school, and there are wide differences with pupils nationally.

Progress information based on teachers' assessments at the end of the summer term indicates an improving trend for pupils who are currently in Years 8 to 11. However, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are indicated to continue to make much slower progress than other pupils in the school in all subjects. Disadvantaged pupils, including the most able, in Years 10 and 11 are indicated to be underachieving compared with other pupils of similar ability, and differences compared with national levels show little sign of diminishing. No information was available for pupils who are currently in Year 7.

Pupils eligible for support through Year 7 catch-up funding made rapid and accelerated progress in English while in Year 7. Phonics (letters and the sounds they make), together with a range of other literacy interventions, are supporting pupils well in helping them to become better readers and to develop a love of reading. Support for numeracy is weak and pupils eligible for funding failed to make sufficient progress to help them to catch up with their peers and in many cases the differences widened.

Outcomes in the sixth form continue to improve, especially in vocational subjects. Most students resitting GCSE English and mathematics improve their grade, with many attaining a grade C or above.

External support

The executive headteacher is currently reviewing the range of external support provided through the sponsor. A more selective approach will be used, continuing with support that has been effective and supplementing with other support to improve teaching through Streetly Academy. Discussions continue regarding the possibility of re-brokering and moving to a new sponsor.