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Mr Robin Grover
The ACE Academy
Alexandra Road
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Dear Mr Grover

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit with Alison Naylor and Mark Feldman, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 1–2 March 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 fourth 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

School leaders may appoint newly qualified teachers but only in English and mathematics and no more than two in each of the English and mathematics departments.

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 Metropolitan Borough Council. 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 improves 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 1–2 March 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and other senior leaders, the Chair of the newly formed Governing Body and four representatives from Education Central Multi Academy Trust (ECMAT), the sponsor to the school. Inspectors met formally with a group of pupils from Year 10 and a group of learners from the sixth form. Inspectors spoke with pupils during lessons about their work, and at breaks and lunchtime to gather their views on the school.

Context

Since the third monitoring inspection, there have been very few changes in staffing and the school is experiencing a much needed period of stability in teaching staff. Five new permanent teachers have joined the school since the last visit with a further three teachers given temporary contracts to further support teaching and leadership in mathematics, science and business studies. A new governing body has been assembled under the leadership of a newly appointed Chair.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

New systems to analyse teachers' assessments have been introduced and leaders now have accurate information which they are able to use to good effect in their plans to improve the school. This includes the identification of particular groups, or individual pupils, who need additional support to help them to improve their attendance or behaviour, or to catch up with their classmates if they are underachieving. Representatives from the sponsor confirmed that they are presented with far more detailed information than at any point in the past, which allows them to better hold leaders to account for their work.

Leaders gather information in a systematic way with regular, scheduled reviews on the work of the school. This includes short visits to lessons, formal reviews involving external consultants, checks on pupils' work and meetings with pupils to find out their views on teaching. Although a wide range of information is used to inform leaders' views of teaching, not enough weight is given to the impact of teaching on learning through the use of the accurate teachers' assessments that leaders now have available to them. Further refinement is needed to the way in which leaders make judgements on the quality of teaching as these are overgenerous.

Although senior leaders work tirelessly together as a team to improve the school, not all teachers have high enough expectations for behaviour and punctuality. Inspectors saw teachers regularly reminding pupils about their uniform and the need to fasten their tie or shirt correctly but failed to challenge pupils who arrived late for their lessons. Pupils were seen wandering around the corridors several

minutes into lessons, often unchallenged by teachers, and causing disruption to their lesson when they eventually arrived. Some pupils use inappropriate language of a sexual nature, or swear at each other, within 'ear-shot' of teachers who sometimes appear to ignore this unacceptable behaviour.

Pupils continue to enjoy their learning in the 'solace' curriculum and inspectors saw pupils enthusiastically discussing the refugee crisis in Europe through their understanding of journeys. Some lessons lacked sufficient input of subject knowledge, such as geography, and therefore it is unclear how well prepared pupils will be to study GCSEs in history and geography when they start these courses in Year 9.

Sixth form leaders took immediate action in response to feedback given at the last visit which identified weaknesses in learners' skills for independent living and the information learners were given on how to keep themselves safe from the threats posed by extremism and radicalisation. Sixth form learners now have a deeper understanding of financial awareness, managing a bank account and cooking to help them when they go to university or continue to other employment or training. Learners told inspectors that, although this aspect had improved markedly, they would still like more information on these and other, similar themes. Leaders are rigorous in their monitoring of sixth form learners who leave the school and check that their destinations are appropriate to their needs and sustained.

The inaugural meeting of the newly formed governing body was held in November, shortly after the last inspection, with all vacant positions being filled. The Chair is knowledgeable and has the necessary skills to identify where leaders' actions are failing to have sufficient impact. Together with the External Scrutiny Group, governors are ambitious and are driving improvements in the school.

Appointing good-quality teachers to work in the school has been a challenge, particularly so in English and mathematics. School leaders may therefore seek to appoint no more than two newly qualified teachers in each of English and mathematics. However, leaders will need to make certain these teachers are well supported and have the opportunity to see more effective teaching practice from teachers in other schools.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders claim that teaching is good or better in about two thirds of all lessons in the school. However, pupils continue to make much slower progress than their peers nationally. Teaching is therefore not yet good enough to accelerate progress to make up for the inadequacies of teaching in the past. This is because many teachers do not use assessment well enough to identify what pupils can and cannot do to provide them with work that is at the right level for them. Pupils are sometimes given superficial work to do, such as word searches, rather than using the time more productively to fill gaps in pupils' knowledge or understanding. Similarly, in working through past exam questions, too much time is spent on

practising work that pupils can already do which teachers say helps to improve confidence, rather than pupils being taught new or harder work.

Poor behaviour in lessons is impacting on progress. Pupils are often late for class, so they miss teachers' explanations and don't know what to do. Sometimes teachers restart their lesson for late arrivals, but then pupils who were on time become restless and talk to their friends because they have to wait for attention from the teacher.

Pupils' mathematics skills continue to be weak and are slowing progress in other subjects. In a Year 10 science lesson for the most-able pupils, it took pupils most of the lesson to plan and correctly draw suitable axes to display a graph of results from an experiment. Many pupils did not know how to find a line of best-fit and joined the points instead, leading to errors in using their graph.

Pupils told inspectors that teaching is improving and is often more fun because teachers plan interesting work to do. More effective teaching was characterised by teachers' good questioning, which makes pupils think about their work, and where time is used well so that pupils are moved on before they become bored and restless. Pupils' written work in a range of subjects is improving. Extended writing, with detailed explanations, was seen in science as well as in English. Marking in books is also improving, in accordance with the school's policy. Teachers focus on improving literacy through consistently asking pupils to correct spelling or grammatical errors. Additional challenges help pupils to think about how to improve their own work which they do in 'mad' (make a difference) time.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Poor behaviour, in particular from pupils in Year 8, is not being tackled consistently well by all teachers. Teachers who are firm and fair in managing behaviour are respected by their pupils who show positive attitudes to learning. Many teachers understand their responsibility to teach pupils how to behave and they do this well, such as by rewarding positive behaviour when they see it. However, pupils told inspectors they have little faith in some teachers who 'do nothing' to stop the poor behaviour in their lessons. Following the headteacher's reminder to staff to tackle poor behaviour and punctuality, which he did at the end of the first day, behaviour improved on day two of the inspection. Pupils claim that the school's behaviour policy 'keeps changing' but their confusion is due to inconsistencies in the way teachers interpret and apply this policy.

The number of exclusions for unacceptable behaviour has greatly reduced because leaders are using a greater range of other sanctions, including detentions and staged warning letters which are sent home to parents. Leaders organise links with external agencies such as health and social care professionals to work with individual pupils who need this extra help. Counselling is used well to help pupils who are particularly anxious or who need support for their mental health concerns.

Attendance remains well below the national average because there are at least a quarter of each year group who have very low attendance due to frequent absences. Year 11 has the highest number of pupils who are persistently absent which is, undoubtedly, slowing their learning. Pupils are now allocated to a mentor who meets regularly with pupils to help them to improve their attendance, and a range of rewards are used as incentives for pupils such as pizza parties and tickets for football matches. Attendance contracts are used well for pupils in Key Stage 4 and school leaders are currently extending this approach to Key Stage 3 so that poor attendance is tackled earlier than has been the case in the past.

Outcomes for pupils

Information provided by school leaders on the 'current working at grades' for pupils in Years 10 and 11 indicates little improvement on the GCSE outcomes seen in 2015. Teachers predict marked improvements for Year 11 in their summer exams, but time is running out and it is difficult to see how these predictions will be realised. Pupils have recently experienced four consecutive days of intensive catch-up work in English and mathematics. Pupils are making much better progress in English than in mathematics where only about a third of Year 11 are indicated to be currently making the progress they should. However, outcomes are much better for pupils who attend regularly in all year groups, with the progress for these pupils being similar to national averages in English and mathematics.

Using accurate teachers' assessments, leaders know about the improvements being made to the literacy skills of pupils who start in the school below Level 4 in English. This is because the school's literacy strategy is working and weak readers are improving their reading. Just over half of these pupils have already successfully attained a Level 4 in English. Work to improve weak numeracy skills is less effective because there is no clear strategy to identify specific gaps in mathematical knowledge, skills or understanding and then to teach the work that is needed to fill these gaps.

Achievement in the sixth form continues to improve in vocational subjects, where teachers carefully plan resources to challenge learners appropriately. Progress is good when teachers encourage learners in Years 12 and 13 to work things out for themselves, rather than relying on support and guidance from their teachers. This is not yet done well by all teachers and sometimes tasks are set which are at too low a level, such as to identify and describe rather than infer, interpret and analyse.

External support

External support from two outstanding schools has been commissioned through the sponsor and school leaders. This continues to be effective and is focused mainly on improving achievement in English, mathematics and science along with further support to improve the curriculum. Support for the headteacher, through a coaching relationship with a colleague headteacher commissioned through the sponsor, is set to continue.