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Mrs Jenny Langley
Principal
Great Academy Ashton
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Lancashire
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Dear Mrs Langley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Great Academy Ashton

Following my visit with John Leigh and Annette Patterson, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 23–24 January 2018, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in February 2017. 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.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim governing body and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and

the director of children's services for Tameside. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Helen O'Neill
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in February 2017.

- Rapidly improve pupils' progress in core subjects, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, by:
 - using information about pupils' abilities to plan suitable learning
 - making learning engaging
 - using questioning to better challenge the most able pupils.
- Improve the quality of teaching and in turn, reduce incidents of poor behaviour and reduce truancy by:
 - using information about pupils' abilities to plan suitable learning
 - ensuring that behaviour is managed fairly, consistently and proportionately
 - establishing a positive, supportive and rewarding climate for learning.
- Improve behaviour, safety and the personal development and welfare of pupils by:
 - ensuring that all staff receive child protection training
 - increasing the numbers of staff on duty at social times and the end of the school day
 - reducing racist, homophobic and other derogatory language around the school
 - ensuring that internal and external exclusions lead to improvements in behaviour.
- Improve the 16 to 19 study programmes by:
 - ensuring that almost all pupils who start Year 12 complete Year 13
 - improving the quality of teaching to improve progress
 - evaluating rigorously the current quality of provision
 - creating a coherent plan for improvement.
- Immediately improve the quality of leadership by:
 - strengthening the process of self-evaluation
 - rigorously evaluating the impact of new initiatives, including by taking into account the views of pupils, parents and teachers
 - holding leaders at all levels accountable for the standards that pupils achieve.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 23 January 2018 to 24 January 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, members of the senior leadership team, middle leaders, a group of pupils, the chief executive and a teaching and learning consultant from the multi-academy trust.

The inspectors carried out observations of lessons and looked at pupils' work. Some of these activities were undertaken jointly with senior leaders and the trust's teaching and learning consultant. The inspectors observed pupils during lessons and social times.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, two new appointments have been made to stabilise staffing in the mathematics department. These experienced teachers will take up their posts in the near future. The principal, the chair of the governing body and the trust leaders have undertaken an in-depth review of the English department. As a result, the leadership of this department has changed. Other department reviews are being held.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have maintained the momentum since the previous monitoring inspection. Teachers and pupils can see the changing culture across all aspects of school life. The principal is relentless in pursuing a vision of excellence for all. This is underpinned by a non-negotiable viewpoint that the route to success is through high-quality teaching and learning. Leaders, staff and pupils are rightly pleased with what has been achieved so far. However, they also know that there is still a long journey ahead.

The principal, with great support from the trust and interim governing body, has successfully established a culture of accountability at all levels. There is now a shared sense of responsibility from all staff which is firmly based in robust policies. These enable staff and leaders to be crystal clear about their roles and responsibilities in continuing to improve the school. There is a greater clarity of roles for senior and middle leaders. Any staff who are not performing to the high standards expected of them are supported to improve. The trust and governing body have shifted from establishing trust and repairing teams, to an unremitting expectation for all to improve as rapidly, yet as sensibly, as possible. Underperformance at all levels is challenged and this is beginning to have a positive impact on improving the school.

The 'improving teaching' team and school leaders are moving away from routine, mechanistic observations of teaching and learning to delivering more bespoke and individualised support. The ability for leaders at all levels to move on from the minutiae of detail to overarching vision and goals is timely, as the school sets out to define clearly what makes Great Academy Ashton unique and what is right for all stakeholders.

Improvements in attendance and punctuality mean that pupils are attending school and lessons more regularly. The improvements in behaviour, teaching and learning mean that pupils are now in a strong position to learn well. Leaders are beginning to turn the tide of the legacy of underachievement which has pervaded the school.

Leaders have created a working group to design a curriculum better suited to the needs of pupils. This working party ensures that pupils in Years 10 and 11 receive the right number of lessons to help pupils to be successful. The working group has redesigned the options process for Year 9 pupils and improved the curriculum offer. This is so that pupils are better equipped to succeed at key stage 4 and in life after school. The focus on health and sport means that pupils have opportunities to improve their activity levels and mental well-being, alongside their academic studies.

Leadership at all levels is improving. Senior and middle leaders are identifying the key issues facing the school and they are initiating strategies to address these. That said, some leaders are not routinely measuring the success of these initiatives. As a result, they are not clear about the impact of their actions on pupils' learning and progress.

The trust continues to provide high-quality support and challenge for leaders and teachers. Leaders of the trust recognise the strength, resilience and effectiveness of the principal. The trust and the chair of the interim governing body have been instrumental in reviewing senior leaders' capacity to lead the school more effectively.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The improvements in the climate for learning in lessons, seen during the first monitoring visit, are being strengthened further. Pupils are compliant and generally want to work hard and learn well. However, inspectors continued to see considerable variability in the quality of learning in the lessons observed during this visit.

Pupils make good progress where teachers show passion and interest in their subject. They also make secure progress where teachers enthuse pupils through engaging lessons, which put in context why they are learning particular knowledge and skills. In these sessions, unobtrusive behaviour management techniques subtly ensure that pupils are on task, without slowing the pace of lessons. Strong and warm relationships between pupils and teacher are evident in classrooms where

high expectations, and accurate planning to meet their needs, mean that pupils believe they can achieve success.

Pupils also say that teaching is improving. They described to inspectors how teachers are engaging pupils through using a range of strategies to encourage them to participate. Pupils characterise successful lessons as those in which they are challenged to learn. Pupils also told the inspectors that staff seem 'happier' and genuinely want pupils to succeed. These positive relationships underpin the changes seen around the school. Staff and pupils are now rebuilding positive, trusting relationships based upon growing mutual respect.

Teachers are also putting into place a variety of techniques that they have developed during ongoing training sessions. Pupils appreciate this. However, from evidence seen during the inspection, teachers are not routinely selecting the most appropriate strategy to use in the classroom and these strategies are not yet embedded into daily practice.

Teachers and leaders are also using assessment systems more effectively to understand how much progress pupils have made through a term or unit of work. However, teachers are not routinely using the information that they have about their pupils to plan work that enables pupils to make consistently good progress from their different starting points.

The behaviour of pupils in lessons continues to improve and teachers are growing in confidence of what works well for classes and individuals. However, all too often, pupils receive the same work regardless of their ability or any additional learning needs. This means that some pupils find the work difficult to grasp, while others are waiting to move on more rapidly. Some lessons are dull and fail to ignite pupils' interests. The opportunity now for teachers to move from 'planning for control' to 'planning to learn' is exciting. Pupils are much more ready and willing to work closely with their teachers and, as a result, are beginning to make stronger and more rapid progress.

Improvements in teaching and learning have resulted in some pupils making better progress. However, for some groups of pupils, for example the most able pupils, those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language, their progress is less secure. This is because, on many occasions, the work does not accurately meet the needs of these pupils. Challenge for all pupils, appropriate to their starting points, is still an area for development across many subject areas and year groups.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour continues to improve. Pupils who spoke with the inspectors were united in their opinion that behaviour is currently better than it has been for many years. Pupils are appreciative of the principal's focused and pupil-centred approach. They attribute the successes in this area to her presence and leadership. Other leaders

have ably supported the principal in improving attendance and reducing incidents of poor behaviour.

Staff work hard to ensure consistency in behaviour management. There is now a shared language used across the school for managing behaviour and reminding pupils of the school's high expectations. Most pupils know how to conduct themselves in lessons and around the school site. The vast majority are polite to visitors and wear their uniforms with pride. Relationships between staff and pupils are warmer and improving. Pupils welcome the rewards they receive for their efforts and are delighted that staff trust pupils enough to arrange foreign trips and more regular events and extra-curricular activities.

While behaviour overall is improving, there is a small but persistent group of pupils who continue to cause concern. Behaviour at social times continues to improve, but some pupils cannot yet self-regulate their behaviour sufficiently. As pupils begin to move to lessons after break and lunchtimes, noise levels rise and behaviour begins to deteriorate. Leaders are aware of hotspots and deploy staff appropriately.

Behaviour in lessons has improved considerably. The vast majority of pupils arrive on time and prepared to learn. Pupils recognise that there has been a significant shift in attitudes to learning and welcome the opportunity to get more involved in lessons. They now participate more in learning as a result of a wide range of different activities and resources used in some lessons.

Most pupils now learn in calm, ordered classrooms. However, there are still occasions when low-level disruption distracts from teaching and learning. This prevalence of low-level disruption generally occurs in lessons where teachers do not routinely plan lessons that meet the needs of pupils. As a result, pupils begin to misbehave when they find the work unchallenging, too repetitive or difficult to access.

Teachers' management of any poor behaviour for learning is mostly effective. However, despite reducing the use of internal exclusion, the school's incidences of fixed-term exclusions remain too high. Leaders are building links with other schools and working closely with pupils and their families to reduce external exclusions. Unfortunately, there is still a minority of pupils and their families who are not supportive of leaders' efforts to improve the school. Leaders are aware that there is still work to do to improve relationships with some hard-to-reach families. More positively, the improvements in behaviour are evident as pupils leave the school site in an orderly manner. Bus drivers spoke highly of the improved behaviour of pupils. Improvements, therefore, are being seen both inside the school and within the wider community.

Attendance and punctuality are improving due to strong leadership of this area. Attendance now is two percentage points higher than last year and is closer to the national average. Leaders have established effective and efficient systems to improve pupils' attendance and punctuality. Together with support staff, they work effectively with parents, carers and outside agencies. Relationships with parents continue to strengthen.

Pupils are rewarded regularly for good attendance. Leaders have also introduced an element of competition between forms. This keeps pupils motivated and keen to improve their attendance further. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is declining and leaders should be rightly pleased with this. However, despite leaders' work with pupils and parents to explain the negative impact that poor attendance has on achievement, persistent absence for some pupils remains stubbornly high. Attendance for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities remains a key priority for leaders to tackle.

Outcomes for pupils

Leaders are acutely aware that outcomes in the past have been adversely affected by poor-quality teaching and poor attitudes to learning. Low attendance is also a significant barrier to progress for some pupils.

According to information provided by the school, early indications are that outcomes are beginning to improve for current key stage 4 pupils. However, leaders recognise that the rate of improvements needs to accelerate. Leaders have changed the teaching time allocated to subjects in Year 11 so that pupils have increased time in core subjects and in option subjects. Nonetheless, pupils are still performing considerably below their target grades in a majority of subjects.

Vulnerable pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, those who have SEN and/or disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language, need to catch up quickly. The most able pupils are not making good progress in the vast majority of subjects.

Current pupils in Year 10 are achieving better outcomes. However, these pupils are a more able year group and should be doing even better. Leaders are aware that the rates of improvement seen with this year group need to continue to accelerate so that pupils start to achieve the progress expected of them.

Outcomes for other learners indicate that while pupils still underachieve, their progress is slowly improving. This is a direct result of improvements to attendance, behaviour and teaching and learning. Curriculum changes are also supporting learning by ensuring that pupils currently choosing their GCSE subjects will be offered a range of courses more suited to their academic and welfare needs.

As a result of more accurate and robust assessment processes, leaders have access to a wealth of progress and attainment data. Key headlines are still difficult to identify from the detail collected by leaders as they do not yet evaluate and synthesise this data in a way which identifies trends and issues. This information would then be accessible for all staff and useful in informing any decisions and actions to be taken.

Overall, information provided by the school indicates that outcomes are improving slowly for pupils at all key stages. However, these improvements are fragile and need to be consolidated and accelerated over the coming months.

External support

The trust has secured the services of an external leadership coach to further develop senior leaders' leadership skills.

The trust's teaching and learning team continues to work closely with teachers to drive forward improving the quality of teaching and learning.