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Mrs Jenny Langley
Principal
Great Academy Ashton
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Dear Mrs Langley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Great Academy Ashton

Following my visit with Jane Holmes, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 9 to 10 January 2019, 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 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.

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 executive board, 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 9 and 10 January 2019

Evidence

During the inspection, inspectors met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and other staff. Inspectors also met with teaching-and-learning consultants and the chief executive of the multi-academy trust. They also spoke with the chair of the interim executive board by telephone. In addition, inspectors held formal and informal discussions with pupils from across both key stages.

Inspectors carried out observations of learning and looked at pupils' work. Some of these activities were undertaken jointly with senior leaders and consultants from the trust. Inspectors also observed pupils during lessons, social times and when moving to and from lessons. As part of the inspection, inspectors also considered information provided by the school relating to school improvement, attendance, behaviour and documentation relating to teaching and learning. Inspectors also examined documents relating to safeguarding.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit, several teachers have left the school and leaders have appointed seven new members of staff. Key appointments of faculty leader of mathematics and subject lead for history have been made.

Staffing has stabilised significantly across the school and leaders have ensured that the mathematics department is now fully staffed. There is one vacancy at senior leadership level. Pupils are positive about the staffing changes and say that the proportion of lessons taught by temporary teachers is now low. Leaders have built a team of teachers who are committed to improving the quality of education at Great Academy.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher continues to demonstrate a clear vision for the school. Her commitment and determination to rapidly address the identified weaknesses exemplify her unswerving dedication to pupils and to making a positive difference to their lives.

Great Academy Ashton is a truly inclusive school. Leaders do not give up on any pupil, no matter how challenging or difficult the obstacles. Leaders are determined that every pupil feels a sense of belonging to the school. Pupils appreciate this caring approach and told inspectors that they know the headteacher 'genuinely cares' and wants the very best for them.

Safeguarding procedures are exemplary. Leaders ensure that pupils and their families receive the timely and bespoke support they need. Leaders are proactive in

engaging and working with other agencies to develop further the support they can offer pupils. Identification, actions and interventions for pupils who are vulnerable to harm are highly effective. The impact of support is closely monitored and there is strong evidence that inclusion provision meets the needs well of pupils who are vulnerable or who have significant social, emotional and/or mental health needs. Because of the strong leadership of this area, staff are well trained and vigilant in identifying pupils in need and dealing with those in crisis. Leaders are influential in changing actions and attitudes beyond the school in relation to safety in the wider community. As a result, pupils feel safe in all areas of the school.

The curriculum includes a broad range of subjects which are designed to meet the needs of pupils and equip them for success in the future. A broad range of qualifications are on offer at key stage 4 to enable pupils to study languages, separate sciences, creative subjects and vocational courses. As a result of a curriculum which better suits the needs of pupils, more pupils are now staying on in education or entering employment or training than ever before.

Teaching and learning consultants from the trust and senior leaders from the school provide consistently high-quality professional development for staff. Staff are willing to embrace and try new strategies, but these are not embedded across the school. The inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning within and between departments are hindering overall progress towards the removal of special measures. The improvements seen in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have faltered somewhat since the previous visit.

Over time, the leaders of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have not proved effective in improving the progress of pupils with SEND. Historically, pupils with SEND make the weakest progress in the school. Progress for this group of pupils is not improving, unlike the progress of all other groups of pupils in the school. While leaders can identify those pupils in need of support, there is limited knowledge of the root cause of pupils' barriers to learning and their individual needs. As a result, leaders cannot explain which interventions best meet pupils' needs and whether or not these strategies have been successful. Leaders do not know how well current pupils with SEND are progressing across the curriculum and in different year groups.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

While there have been significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning since the inspection in February 2017, teaching remains variable in its effectiveness. Evidence seen in pupils' books and of learning over time shows that pupils' experiences of learning still vary greatly. Pupils told inspectors that although the challenge in lessons has improved, the quality of learning depends too much on which teachers they have. As a result of these inconsistencies, some pupils' learning remains weak.

Across the school, there is a growing proportion of effective teaching. This occurs when teachers' expectations are high and they set interesting tasks which are well matched to the needs of pupils. Because of well-planned learning, pupils respond well, behave appropriately and engage with their learning. Productive starts to lessons are now firmly embedded across the school and ensure that pupils are increasingly on task as soon as they enter the classroom.

There are still too many occasions when teaching does not adequately meet the needs of pupils. For example, when teachers assume pupils do not have any prior knowledge of a concept, teaching is pitched too low and does not stretch and challenge pupils appropriately. Sometimes, teachers do not know how much progress pupils have made in their knowledge and understanding. This means that future learning is not designed well enough to move pupils on effectively. When teachers' expectations are low, or teaching is not planned to meet pupils' needs, pupils can become disengaged from their learning, display poor attitudes and a lethargy towards their work.

Information about current pupils' achievement is regularly gathered through assessments and is analysed by leaders. This allows teachers and leaders to know how well pupils are doing. Assessment information is used well, particularly in science, to address gaps in pupils' learning. However, this level of intervention does not fully compensate for the less effective teaching they have received over time.

Pupils who spoke with inspectors talked favourably about improvements in the quality of teaching and learning overall. They say that in the majority of lessons, work is not too easy or too difficult and that low-level disruption has decreased as a result. They are positive about the recent staffing appointments and have confidence in the headteacher to continue to improve their daily learning experiences.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour around school and in lessons continues to improve. Mutual trust and respect between pupils and staff are being effectively rebuilt for the vast majority of pupils. A small minority of older pupils are, however, still not buying-in to the school's ethos and vision of inclusivity and excellence. There remains a lack of urgency on the part of a small minority of pupils to move promptly to lessons after breaktime or lunchtime or at lesson changeovers. Nevertheless, most pupils are now able to manage their own behaviour and speak to each other nicely. Leaders and staff consistently reinforce how to behave as one community and how to treat each other with care and respect, regardless of differences. This area of school life has improved significantly as a result.

Improved attitudes to learning are increasingly evident in classes as the majority of pupils now respond well to direction from staff and participate more fully in lessons. Discriminatory behaviour is reducing considerably, and the use of inappropriate

language is now rarely heard around the school. Improved behaviour is becoming a strength of the school as pupils who transfer in from other schools, often following unsuccessful experiences, settle well and begin to thrive at Great Academy. The inclusive atmosphere fostered by staff and leaders means that these pupils now have a fresh start at this school.

Information provided by the school shows a reduction in the number of pupils permanently excluded from school. Fixed term exclusions are falling but remain above the national average as some pupils take time to respond positively to the higher expectations and new demands being made of them. Behaviour is now managed proportionately and consistently. As a result, there is a considerable reduction in the use of internal isolation and less learning time is lost.

For some pupils, alternative provision is used to re-engage them in education. The coordinated work of the safeguarding and inclusion teams enables the right provision to be found for the small number of pupils who are not coping well with the demands of school life. Case studies show that pupils' attendance and behaviour improve significantly on these courses.

Leaders work tirelessly to improve attendance and reduce the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school. There are marginal improvements overall, with pleasing improvements evident for pupils with SEND. Rewards, competitions and improved relationships with families contribute to pupils' improved attitudes to attendance. As pupils told the inspectors, attendance is improving because 'sir is slamming down on that'.

Opportunities for pupils to take responsibility in school are increasing. Pupils speak positively about the many roles available to develop their own leadership through becoming sports captains, learning leaders, student council representatives, peer mentors, form representatives and head boy or head girl. Pupils state unequivocally that cohesion in school is improving, and this was exemplified when the whole school celebrated a sports day together on the field. All staff and pupils were involved, and pupils acknowledge that this was the first time they had experienced such a positive and fun whole-school event.

Outcomes for pupils

Published results for 2018 show an upward trend in achievement for almost all groups of pupils. Attainment measures improved overall. Progress of pupils improved by over a quarter of a grade on average compared to pupils who left the school in the previous year. Although pupils left school on average a quarter of a grade behind their peers nationally, this is the best progress pupils have made at the school for many years. Despite this improving picture, there are still issues in subjects such as history and technology. Disadvantaged pupils performed less well than their peers with similar starting points, particularly in history. Conversely, positive results were achieved in modern foreign languages, where middle-ability

pupils and disadvantaged pupils made strong progress. The progress of boys remains below that of girls.

The proportion of pupils staying on in education, employment or training is at an all-time high. Leaders work hard to raise pupils' aspirations and improve their encounters with employers and businesses to prepare them to become young adults who contribute well to society.

Current pupils are making much stronger progress as they advance through the school due to the improvements in the climate for learning, attendance, curriculum and quality of teaching. However, the progress of pupils who have SEND remains a concern. Historically, the progress of SEND pupils is low and has stagnated. Although the progress of current pupils with SEND in Year 11 is marginally stronger, it is still forecast to be well below the national average.

External support

The chief executive of the trust and interim executive board (IEB) continue to hold the headteacher and other school leaders firmly to account for improving all areas of school life. Members of the board challenge leaders to improve the information they provide to them so that board members have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

The internal support provided by the trust and IEB remains high quality. As a result, the school has not used any external support. School leaders are now beginning to take more part in staff development and the good practice seen across the school is being shared more effectively.