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Dear Mrs Conefrey

Special measures monitoring inspection of Kirkby High School

Following my visit with Philip Wood, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy 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 academy’s previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy 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 academy’s improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing board, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children’s services for Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Neil Mackenzie
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching in order to urgently enhance outcomes for all groups of pupils across all subjects, especially for disadvantaged pupils, boys and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities by:
 - ensuring that all teachers have the skills to assess pupils' progress accurately
 - ensuring that teachers use accurate assessment information to plan lessons to suit the needs of all pupils
 - making sure that teachers have high expectations of what all pupils should achieve for their age and from their respective starting points
 - ensuring that teachers' questioning is used to challenge and stretch the thinking of the most able pupils
 - developing and implementing a policy which is followed by all teachers to improve pupils' literacy skills.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - raising attendance for all pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - ensuring the consistent application of the school's behaviour policy to reduce disruption in lessons
 - continuing to reduce the rates of exclusion.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that all leaders rigorously monitor the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes so that they have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
 - sharpening school development planning so that it is more effective in driving improvement
 - developing the skills of leaders of different subjects and groups so that they are able to improve the quality of teaching and raise pupils' achievement
 - ensuring that leaders use the pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up funding more effectively to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and younger pupils who have fallen behind
 - ensuring that the sponsor and governors rigorously hold all leaders to account for improving the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken

in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Priorities for further improvement identified during the first monitoring inspection that took place in September 2017.

■ Improve teachers' skills in:

- planning lessons which pupils find interesting and engaging
- challenging all pupils to think deeply about their ideas and opinions
- developing pupils' abilities to express themselves with confidence
- providing the right level of work for all groups of pupils in lessons, particularly the most able.

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

Evidence

My colleague and I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, the trust's chief executive officer, the executive headteacher, members of the school's senior leadership team, three members of the governing body and groups of middle leaders. Inspectors visited classrooms to observe pupils learning and examine their work. We spoke to pupils during their break- and lunchtimes.

Context

You took over the role of acting headteacher at the start of this month following the sudden illness of the substantive headteacher. Your experience as the trust's head of school improvement meant that you already knew the school well. This is one of the factors that has enabled you to ensure that the school continues to improve. A new chair of the local governing body has also taken up post from the end of September 2017.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

- There are clear signs of improvement since my last visit at the start of last term. Your detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school has enabled you to step quickly into the acting headteacher role. You have also ensured that there has been no slowing of improvements. You have ensured that key changes are becoming firmly established throughout the school.
- During your very short time as acting headteacher you have raised the expectations of how good teaching can be in this school and you have inspired staff, helping them believe they can meet these higher standards. Staff have a clear sense of purpose and support school improvement enthusiastically.
- The overall quality of the school's leadership has improved. Leaders are producing much better quality and more accurate information about how well key aspects of the school are performing. They are making accurate evaluations on how good provision is. Leaders are becoming much more skilled in using their analyses to inform further improvements. Leaders have a very realistic perspective on how far improvements have taken the school. For example, behaviour around the school has improved considerably. Leaders acknowledge that this is a significant achievement, but the improved behaviour has yet to have a meaningful impact on improving how well pupils learn.
- Leadership has improved because the substantive headteacher, you and other members of the multi-academy trust are skilfully developing leaders' capacity to drive improvement.
- The local governing body is continuing to act on the guidance that they were

given from a review of governance undertaken in July 2017. The body is now fully restructured, with sub-groups contributing to the work of the main body. They are finding a much better balance between supporting leaders and challenging them. Minutes of local governing body meetings reveal that governors are asking much more detailed and robust questions. They expect to be well informed about the impact that leaders are having. As school leaders have, governors also have a very realistic understanding on how well the school is performing.

- Whole-school development planning conducted by senior leaders is becoming much more rigorous. Lines of accountability, criteria for measuring success and deadlines are clear. Senior leaders from the trust hold you and other school leaders strictly to account for the quality and pace of improvement. Middle leaders are less skilled in developing improvement plans to affect change.
- You, other senior leaders and members of the trust have begun to improve the systems and procedures required to manage an effective school. The school now has a highly effective system to monitor how well pupils are achieving. It provides valuable and up-to-date information on how well year groups, different groups of pupils and individual pupils are progressing. Senior leaders are skilled in accessing information quickly and in providing simple and clear analyses. They and governors are now much better at using information to identify strengths and weaknesses with more precision. Leaders of subjects and pastoral leaders are developing these skills and beginning to take responsibility for driving improvement within their areas. Teachers are becoming more skilled in assessing their pupils' work. As teachers improve the accuracy of their assessments, the school's achievement monitoring systems become even more valuable.
- Improvement to the quality of teaching throughout the school is gathering momentum. You and other senior leaders are giving teachers clear direction and guidance on how to make teaching more effective. Staff tell me that, since the last monitoring visit, there was a dip in morale. However, they are once again up for the challenge of improving learning across the school because they feel well supported. Nurturing and supporting pupils has always been a strong feature of this school. Staff are now beginning to add successful learning to the list of ambitions they have for Kirkby pupils.
- The school continues to get very good challenge, support and guidance from the trust.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

- The quality of teaching is still very variable, but improving. Teaching in art, drama and other creative arts is particularly strong. In these lessons pupils work with enthusiasm and show curiosity. Teaching in science, modern foreign languages and technology is improving, but slowly.
- Teachers are beginning to expect more from their pupils. They are making better use of the information that they have on what their pupils already know and can

do. Where teaching is most effective, there is a highly positive culture. Pupils are eager to enter the room, knowing that the teacher will have prepared effective and interesting activities for them. Pupils follow well-established routines, time is not wasted. When asked, pupils will say that teaching is improving. They say that in some classes learning is more fun and that they do a lot more. However, they, too, recognise that the quality of teaching is variable.

- In books there is evidence of pupils benefiting from feedback that they receive from teachers. Pupils' confidence is being built where teachers celebrate what precisely pupils have done well. Pupils are now making an effort to react positively to suggestions made by their teacher on what they need to do to make their work even better. Again, evidence shows that this is variable, but improving.
- A greater number of teachers are asking pupils more searching questions. In some classes pupils are being required to think more deeply and explain their ideas. Where this happens, all pupils are benefiting, but it is having a particularly positive effect on accelerating the achievement of the most able.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

- The improvement in pupils' behaviour since September, is very impressive. The new behaviour policy introduced at the start of the year is now clearly having a highly positive effect. Pupils say that behaviour is much better and almost all attribute this to 'stricter' behaviour management. They say that they know where they stand and that the application of sanctions is consistent. A few other pupils attribute improved behaviour to improved teaching. Pupils appreciate the improvements in behaviour because they understand that they benefit from being happier in school and that their learning is better.
- Provision for pupils who need additional support to help them behave has also improved significantly, and this is reflected in the rapidly declining numbers of pupils being excluded.
- The most impressive aspect of pupils' behaviour is that seen during break- and lunchtimes. Pupils are calm and sociable. They chat with friends and adults. Pupils show respect for their environment and there is now virtually no litter left in any part of the school. Despite significant congestion on stairways, pupils move safely and arrive at lessons promptly.
- The full impact of improved behaviour is only having minimal effect on the achievement of pupils and this is dependent on the approach of the teacher. Some teachers are recognising the opportunities that they now have to trust their pupils to work more independently and in groups. When this happens, pupils can be seen to be engaging enthusiastically in discussions about their work with other pupils. They work collaboratively, eagerly and productively. However, where teachers are still talking to the whole class for extended periods, pupils can be seen to switch off. In these classes, pupils will now not misbehave, but simply disengage.

- Poor attendance is still limiting pupils' achievement. This is now a considerable focus for all members of staff. The school has implemented a wide range of strategies to improve attendance. These, however, are only having a marginal improvement on attendance. On average, Year 11 pupils are absent for about a half day a week. The attendance of Year 10 girls is poor.

Outcomes for pupils

- Pupils' achievement is improving. The rate of improvement is faster for key stage 3 pupils than for those in key stage 4. This is because pupils are having to catch up with missed learning from previous years. For example, it was observed in a Year 11 English class that the teacher was having to correct misconceptions about grammar that would normally have been addressed in Year 7. In science, too, pupils tend to be working at a lower standard than seen in other schools. However, the improving attitudes of pupils and the increasing expectations of teachers are beginning to address these problems, leading to accelerated rates of progress.
- Almost all of pupils currently in Year 11 sat their English literature examination at the end of Year 10. School leaders were disappointed with these results. The school's monitoring system indicates that these same pupils, now in Year 11, are making better progress in English language.
- The difference that existed between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others in the school appears to be diminishing slightly. Based on an excellent review of how additional funding is spent to promote outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, strategies are changing. As with much of the school, there is evidence of improvement with more to achieve.
- Weak literacy continues to be a barrier to pupils improving their attainment across all subjects. Teachers accept that they all have a role to improve pupils' literacy. However, there is not yet a clear understanding of the role that individual teachers need to have to make a significant impact in improving pupils' literacy.
- Although improving, pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities are not achieving well enough. They have always been well cared for. However, in the past, it was not clear who was accountable for the progress these pupils made. As with other aspects of the school, this is becoming clearer and contributing to improvement. Class teachers now have the principal responsibility for ensuring that pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make good progress. Teachers are well supported by a team of experienced teaching assistants. Within the inclusion department there is considerable understanding about the needs of individual pupils and better information is now being distributed to teachers.

External support

- External support, beyond the trust, has focused mainly on some key staff visiting

other schools that are successfully addressing similar issues to those at Kirkby High School. It is clear that these visits have been very worthwhile. They have inspired staff and given them ideas and confidence to continue to strive to improve.