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Dame Maureen Brennan
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Dear Dame Maureen

Special measures monitoring inspection of Bloxwich Academy

Following my visit with Rob Hackfath, Her Majesty's Inspector and Josie Leese, Ofsted Inspector to your academy on 13–14 December 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 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 November 2015. 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 academy may appoint newly qualified teachers in the secondary phase, but that any prospective appointments to the primary phase should be discussed in advance with HMI.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2015.

- Improve teaching so that pupils consistently make good or better progress and close the gaps in their learning and skills by making sure that all teachers:
 - plan lessons that capture pupils’ interests so that they are motivated to learn
 - offer feedback that helps pupils to improve their work and understand what they need to do to succeed
 - use information about pupils’ progress and attainment to plan activities that build on their prior knowledge, skills and understanding that results in pupils of different abilities being challenged to learn well
 - check pupils’ progress in lessons to see if pupils need additional support or are ready to move on to more demanding work
 - know how to develop pupils’ reading, writing, communication and numeracy skills in areas outside of English and mathematics.
- Improve leadership and management so that they have a sustained impact on pupils’ outcomes, attendance and behaviour by:
 - making sure that accurate, reliable information about the progress and attainment of all groups of pupils, across all years, is used by leaders to help pupils catch up
 - rigorously monitoring the deployment of additional funding to raise the outcomes and attendance of disadvantaged pupils and to raise the attainment of pupils with lower attainment on entry to the secondary school
 - tackling weak teaching and underperformance in the school
 - developing the skills and expertise of middle leaders so that they are able to improve teaching and outcomes in their areas of responsibility
 - improving the curriculum and the quality of teaching of mathematics in the primary school
 - ensuring that the Trust offers the primary school the support and resources needed to improve
 - recruiting a stable, substantive workforce of specialist teachers and leaders.
- Improve the behaviour of pupils in the secondary phase by:
 - setting clear expectations of pupils’ conduct that are reinforced consistently by all members of staff

- ensuring that pupils move around the site in a sensible and orderly manner
 - making sure that pupils speak to adults and each other respectfully and use appropriate language
 - making sure that pupils follow instructions, listen to their teachers, start work quickly and sustain their concentration on tasks in lessons
 - developing strategies that lead to a reduction in the rate of exclusions from the school.
- Improve pupils' attendance in the secondary phase so that the wide gap between their attendance and that of other pupils nationally reduces rapidly; this also includes considerably reducing the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school.
- Improve the sixth form by:
- making sure that learners who have not secured a GCSE grade 3 or above in English or mathematics by the end of key stage 4 do so by the time they leave the sixth form
 - further raising achievement in academic subject areas so that outcomes are consistently good.
- Improve provision and standards in the early years by:
- developing strong leadership, consistent high-quality teaching and robust assessment systems
 - ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs of children and helps them to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to succeed in primary school, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics.

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.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 13 December 2016 to 14 December 2016

Evidence

The inspectors observed the academy's work on both the primary and secondary school sites. They met with the executive headteacher, the vice chair of the governing body and another governor. They also met the associate headteachers of the primary and secondary phases, other senior and middle leaders, members of staff and groups of pupils. The inspectors looked at a range of documents, including development plans, the school's self-evaluation and minutes of governing body meetings.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection leaders have successfully recruited to all vacant posts in the secondary phase, including four teachers who are newly qualified and three who are currently training as teachers. Rates of staff absence have greatly reduced. There is still some turbulence in the primary phase. The associate headteacher and two teachers in the primary phase are to leave at the end of this term. Several members of staff, including teachers with management responsibility, are on long-term sick leave and their posts are covered on a supply or temporary basis. The trust has made arrangements to cover the headteacher's post until a permanent appointment is made. A deputy headteacher from another of the trust's schools will lead the primary phase, with the support of an experienced primary headteacher for one day a week. A new deputy headteacher will take up post at the start of the spring term.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leadership and management continue to improve, but at varying rates in different aspects of the school's work. The impact of stronger senior leadership shows clearly in the growing strengths in teaching and pupils' outcomes in the secondary phase. In the primary phase, the associate headteacher has continued to shoulder a heavy leadership burden because of sickness absence and recruitment difficulties. In response to this, the trust has provided support for the evaluation of the quality of teaching and this has helped to boost efforts to bring about improvements in teaching. Teachers across the school are given clear feedback about strengths in their teaching and they are given support and guidance to help with aspects that they need to work on.

Middle leaders in both phases are growing in confidence as a result of training and guidance provided by the trust. Secondary middle leaders are increasingly managing their areas of responsibility effectively. They benefit from links with colleagues in other schools within the multi-academy trust and training and development

opportunities specifically designed to extend their leadership skills. Middle leaders have a good command of assessment information and they use this to plan interventions for pupils who need them. For example, pastoral leaders review how well pupils do across all subjects, and form tutors work with pupils to set targets to improve attitudes to learning and outcomes.

The skills of middle leaders in the primary phase are developing well. These leaders are beginning to take greater responsibility for leading improvements and sharing good practice and are increasingly accountable for outcomes in the subjects and phases for which they are responsible.

Leadership of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is strong in the secondary phase. Here, the coordinator has carried out a complete overhaul of the systems and structures and has made sure provision is carefully targeted and that the impact of interventions is measured regularly. The school's leaders intend that a similar root and branch review is carried out in the primary sector, where leadership of this aspect of the school's provision in the primary phase has been hampered by the long-term absence of the post holder.

Leadership of provision in the early years is not effective. Improvements have been slow to come, in part because of the long-term absence of the substantive post holder. Action has been taken since the last inspection to improve aspects of provision, such as the outdoor learning environment. However, the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning in the early years have not been evaluated accurately and there is no clear understanding of what is working well and what needs to be done next to improve children's progress.

The school currently has two self-evaluation documents: one for each phase. In future, it would be helpful for leaders to pull the evaluation information together into one document and to weigh up relative strengths and weaknesses across the school as a whole. This would make it easier for governors to assess the school's overall performance. Some adjustment is needed to the targets for pupils' outcomes in the primary phase's improvement plan. The targets are rightly ambitious, but it is not clear if they are in all cases realistic, and they are not consistent across different parts of the document.

The minutes of governing body meetings show that governors and trustees scrutinise closely the information provided by the associate headteachers and that challenging questions are asked as a result. Governors are clearly ambitious for the school and are holding leaders to account for the progress that is being made on a number of fronts. The associate headteachers prepare monthly reports for governors that include a great deal of information about pupils' outcomes, behaviour and attendance, the quality of teaching and other important matters. This helps governors understand where progress is being made, or otherwise. However, governors do not specifically review the information with reference to the areas for improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. This means that they, and

the school's leaders, may not pick up on some aspects that are not improving as quickly as they should, such as provision and outcomes in the early years.

The planned review of the school's use of the pupil premium took place at the end of the summer term. A plan has been drawn up in the light of the findings and leaders report that actions are having a positive impact, for example on pupils' attendance and attitudes to learning.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching continues to improve overall. There are strengths in teaching in both phases. However, the impact of aspects of teaching on pupils' outcomes remains variable. Where there are concerns about individual teachers' performance, support plans are in place and teachers' progress towards their targets is regularly checked.

Teachers in the secondary phase have a wealth of information about their pupils. Class profiles that are regularly updated ensure that teachers have a high awareness of individuals' circumstances and the progress they are making. However, not all teachers use this information to full effect in lessons. As a result, learning tasks or the pace at which they are completed do not always match what pupils need. Teachers consistently meet leaders' expectations for providing pupils with written feedback. Sometimes, this feedback does not identify precisely enough how pupils can improve their work. As a result, some pupils do not always know how to do better. In contrast, the practice of some teachers is very effective and enables pupils to work on specific skills in order to improve the quality of their work.

In the primary phase, teachers make regular assessments of how well pupils are doing and supplement their assessments with standardised tests in reading and mathematics. In discussion with phase leaders and the associate headteacher, they highlight those pupils who are in danger of falling behind and plan interventions as a result. This system has not been in place for long enough to show a clear impact on boosting pupils' progress across the school.

There is a clear strategic approach to developing pupils' literacy skills across the secondary phase. Teachers are supported in their endeavours by leaders and literacy coaches who have high expertise in this area. Strategies are evaluated through the assessment of pupils' reading ages and observations of learning opportunities that are planned to develop pupils' literacy skills. Teachers' expectations for pupils' use of relevant key terms is increasing. As a result, pupils are becoming more confident in using subject-specific vocabulary. In the primary phase, some teachers use technical vocabulary accurately and expect the pupils to use it too. For example, in a mathematics lesson pupils discussed their work using the terms 'factor' and 'product' with confidence. There were other instances, however, of teachers using terms that were not accurate, because their own subject knowledge was not secure.

There is greater consistency in the primary phase in the way subjects are taught, and teachers all follow the agreed approach to marking. Teachers now use a new scheme for the teaching of mathematics, but the success is greater in some classes than others. Where teachers' subject knowledge is not secure, or where teachers do not spot that pupils have fully grasped what they have been taught and move them on to work of greater depth and challenge, pupils do not make the progress that they are capable of. There are strengths in the way that some teachers ask questions of pupils that probe their thinking and expect them to give detailed answers. Across the primary phase, relationships between pupils and teachers are good and there is a positive climate for learning.

A number of pupils are withdrawn for extra support with reading, writing and mathematics during the afternoon. Pupils try hard, but the impact of these interventions is not as strong as it could be, as some of the staff are not skilled at presenting the learning in a different way when it is clear that a pupil still has not grasped an idea. Some pupils who need to catch up with their reading struggled at times because the books they were given contained words that were not phonically decodable. It is a requirement of the national curriculum that pupils should only read books that enable them to use their knowledge of phonics or of high frequency words until they are confident and fluent readers.

Teaching in the early years is not strong enough to make sure that children make the progress that they should in order to catch up on what is expected for their age. There are strengths in teaching in the Nursery class where children have settled well and are keen to learn, as a result of clear expectations and routines. In Reception, however, children engage superficially in many activities that lack purpose. When asked, children could not say what they were learning about. Adults intervened in children's activities infrequently and some children became too boisterous. This led to limited learning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning in the secondary phase continue to improve, and the strengths in behaviour noted in the primary phase have been maintained.

There is a calm working environment in lessons in the secondary phase and relationships between pupils and adults are positive. Pupils now concentrate for longer periods of time, for example when preparing pieces of extended writing, and are becoming more involved in their learning. However, some pupils still lack confidence and resilience and this hinders their participation.

There are high levels of staff supervision during social times. Pupils respond quickly and positively to instructions from staff, for example ensuring the dining hall is clean and tidy at the end of break. Pupils are polite and respectful of each other, for example they wait patiently to move to lessons at the end of break when entrances and corridors are busy.

Leaders are developing the way the school's satellite centre is used to support pupils whose conduct does not meet expectations. Leaders use the regular and detailed analysis of how this facility is used to identify which groups of pupils have been slower to respond to the raised expectations for conduct. Work to support and reintegrate pupils into lessons is proving successful, and the number of pupils who return to the satellite centre continues to decline. The number of pupils excluded from the school for a fixed period of time continues to fall. There were half as many exclusions in the first half of the autumn term compared to the previous half term.

There has been an encouraging increase in attendance and a reduction in the number of pupils who are persistently absent. Although the overall figure is still below the national average, it has risen by four percentage points; this is a marked improvement.

Pupils continue to behave well in the primary phase, both in lessons and at break and lunchtimes. Pupils' behaviour in assembly was excellent; they listened attentively and sat quietly without fidgeting. Pupils respond quickly to instructions at the end of break time and come in to school quietly and sensibly. In the classroom they are responsive to their teachers and show an interest in learning. They start work straight away and try to keep going even when they find their work challenging. Many join in readily with discussions and contribute their ideas, but some are more hesitant about expressing their thoughts and are less confident about the accuracy of their work.

Outcomes for pupils

Since the school was last inspected, the results of national examinations, tests and assessments taken at the end of the summer term have become available. There are encouraging signs of improvement. Standards are rising in the secondary phase and in some aspects in the primary phase. However, it is not possible to make direct comparisons with previous years because of changes to assessments and progress measures at the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4.

Leaders' determination to make sure that pupils have every opportunity to make up some of the ground they have lost were realised to some extent in 2016. GCSE results show that the strategies used to support Year 11 pupils last year had a positive impact on outcomes. Pupils made better progress in 2016 than their peers did in 2015. Pupils with high prior attainment, including those who are disadvantaged, made relatively stronger progress than pupils with other starting points. Additionally, the proportion of pupils achieving good grades in a range of

subjects, including English and mathematics, improved. Despite these improvements, progress for all pupils in 2016 was over a grade below that of all pupils nationally and their average attainment was two grades lower.

Secondary phase leaders have taken effective action to make sure that assessment information is reliable. The predictions for pupils' attainment in the summer were highly accurate in many subjects, including English. There was more variation between predictions and outcomes in mathematics, reflecting some staff changes last year.

Leaders' analysis of current pupils' progress suggests that the improvements seen in 2016 are set to continue. Based on current performance, key stage 4 pupils' progress is likely to increase by at least another half grade. Leaders predict marked improvements for boys and for pupils with middle and high prior attainment. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities who are supported by the school are making less progress than most other groups of pupils at this time. Leaders continue to develop the ways they analyse assessment information, and how they use it to identify groups of pupils who require additional support.

There are improvements in sixth form outcomes. For example, the average grade achieved for each qualification taken improved from an E grade in 2015 to a C grade in 2016. Leaders' predictions suggest improvements will be sustained and a similar average grade will be achieved by current students. Leaders have increased the range of subjects available, particularly those leading to academic qualifications. The number of students in the sixth form who do not have good GCSE grades in English and mathematics has fallen. This is as a result of the consistent application of sixth form entry requirements and effective tuition for students who do not have these qualifications.

The provisional results of the tests and assessments at key stage 2 were much lower than predicted. The proportion of pupils who attained the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and mathematics was substantially lower than that seen nationally. There was a marked difference between the attainment of pupils who are disadvantaged and that of non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. The school's assessments of pupils' attainment in writing were checked by the local authority's moderator. The results were in line with those seen nationally. Leaders attribute pupils' poor performance in reading and mathematics in part to pupils' lack of confidence and resilience in test conditions.

Pupils' progress in reading and mathematics was poor and in the bottom 10% of schools in the country. Middle and higher attaining pupils made strong progress in writing, but the progress of those with lower starting points was well below that of others with the same starting points nationally. In all subjects, pupils who received support for their special educational needs made substantially less progress than pupils nationally with the same starting points.

At key stage 1, the proportions of pupils attaining the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics were in line with provisional national figures. Disadvantaged pupils' attainment was not significantly different from that of other pupils nationally overall, but very few disadvantaged pupils were assessed as working at greater depth. These outcomes were moderated externally.

At the end of Year 1, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics check improved for the second year in succession and matched that seen nationally.

Just under two thirds of children attained a good level of development at the end of the Reception Year. This was a drop from the previous year and the outcomes are lower than the national and local average.

Work in pupils' books and children's learning journey records in the early years show that pupils are making progress from their starting points, but not at a swift pace across the primary phase. Leaders have detailed information about the attainment and progress of pupils across all year groups, including the outcomes of the regular tests that pupils now take in reading and mathematics. However, the information is not analysed or summarised in a way that enables leaders and governors to see quickly how different groups of pupils, such as those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities or those who are disadvantaged, are doing, or to gauge pupils' progress from their starting points. Arrangements for making sure that teachers' assessments are accurate have been strengthened, and include closer working with other schools.

External support

The school continues to benefit from support provided by leaders from other schools in the Matrix Trust. Support is also provided by other external partners; for example, teachers and pupils in the primary phase are working with staff from Queen Mary's High School to improve teaching and learning in mathematics. The support is having a positive impact. Senior and middle leaders from the secondary phase are giving effective support to leaders in the primary phase, including for the monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning.

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection the trust has taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose.