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Mr D Neal
Interim Principal
The Mirus Academy
Leamore Lane
Bloxwich
Walsall
WS2 7NR

Dear Mr Neal

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Mirus Academy

Following my visit with Denah Jones, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Howard Dodd and Joseph Skivington, Additional inspectors to your academy on 14 and 15 May 2014, 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 which 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 which took place in November 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which 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:

The academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint NQTs in the primary phase but I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint more than two NQTs in the secondary phase.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for

Walsall, the Education Funding Agency, and the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good for all pupils in all years by making sure that all teachers:
 - match work to the different ability levels in their class
 - use additional adults well to support pupils with special educational needs and other pupils needing additional support
 - give clear and specific feedback that helps pupils to understand how to improve their written work, and then make sure that pupils act on this advice.

- Ensure that all pupils make at least good progress so that the standards they reach, particularly in English and mathematics, by the end of Key Stage 4, are at least equal to national averages. Do this by ensuring that:
 - academy leaders recruit subject specialist teachers to any vacancies that exist or occur
 - teachers of English and mathematics use their skills and knowledge to provide specific and expert support to raise attainment in each year group
 - pupils in all year groups have consistently good opportunities to develop and then use their reading, writing, communication and mathematical skills in all subjects
 - pupils, particularly in Years 7 to 11, are taught the skills necessary to be independent learners and then have the opportunity to use these skills in lessons.

- Improve pupils' behaviour so that it is consistently good or better in lessons and around the academy by:
 - implementing strategies to tackle the poor behaviour of a significant minority of older pupils and therefore reduce the number of exclusions from school to below the national average
 - making sure that all pupils experience teaching that engages and motivates them so that they have better attitudes to learning in lessons
 - making sure that all members of staff have high expectations of good behaviour in lessons and around the academy, that these are communicated clearly to pupils and that all teachers are consistent in their management of poor behaviour.

- Increase attendance and reduce the number of pupils who are persistently absent to at least national averages by working with parents, carers and external agencies.

- Improve leadership so that it enables pupils to achieve well by:

- improving the quality of teaching across all years and all subjects to at least good and making sure that all teachers appointed have the necessary subject knowledge
- making sure that leaders of English and mathematics take responsibility for improving pupils' achievement in these two subjects in all years
- ensuring that there are leaders in post who have the expertise, time and capacity to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across all phases in subjects other than English and mathematics
- consistently making judgements on the quality of teaching that take into account how well pupils are making progress over time
- tackling weaknesses in the provision for supporting pupils with special educational needs
- increasing the effectiveness with which leaders at all levels analyse the academy's work to identify what is working well and how improvements can be made
- leaders, including governors, making sure that the pupil premium funding is used to make a significant and sustained difference to the achievement of those groups of pupils it is intended to support
- making sure that the sponsor and governors only commission external support that provides accurate evaluations of the academy's position
- making sure that the independent external review of governance is completed quickly and that this review includes a specific focus on the academy's use of the pupil premium to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 14 and 15 May 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim Principal, senior leaders, middle leaders from both the primary and secondary phases, the Chair of the Governing Body, who is also the sponsor's representative, and four other governors. They observed break times and lunchtimes and talked informally with pupils.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in February, the head of English has left the academy and there is not yet a permanent replacement. Several teaching vacancies are currently filled by temporary staff.

Achievement of pupils at the school

As explained in the academy's full inspection report in November 2013, standards reached by pupils at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 in 2013 in reading, writing and mathematics were well below national averages. Too many pupils did not make nationally expected rates of progress over Key Stage 2. The academy's information indicates that at Key Stage 1, attainment in 2014 may be slightly lower than it was last year. In Key Stage 2, both attainment and progress are looking similar to how they were last year, with the exception of the percentage of pupils making more than the nationally expected rate of progress in writing, which is predicted to rise to be in line with the national figure.

There are two groups of pupils in Key Stage 2 that are taught separately to the rest of their usual classes for literacy and numeracy. This has a negative effect on the progress they are making over time.

The standards reached by Key Stage 4 pupils in 2013 were very low overall and too many pupils made poor progress over their time at the academy. Outcomes in 2013 in Key Stage 4 fell well short of the government's floor standards. Attainment was particularly low in English, where only 26% of pupils gained a GCSE at grades A* to C compared to the national average of 67%. In mathematics, 40% of pupils gained a grade at A* to C, better than attainment in English, but still very low compared to the national average of 70%. There was a considerable gap between the attainment of pupils who are eligible for free school meals and their peers.

Based on their assessment information, the academy predicts that achievement in 2014 will be better than in 2013. Around 37% of current Year 11 pupils are predicted to gain five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. In English,

44% are expected to gain a grade C or above, and 43% are expected to do so in mathematics. More pupils are on track to make nationally expected rates of progress in these subjects. Better outcomes are also predicted in other subjects, including science, physical education, information and communication technology and art.

In 2013, neither sixth form students taking vocational courses nor those taking academic courses made enough progress. Attainment on completion of courses was low, with the exception of work-related learning courses in Year 12 where students' attainment was better than that seen nationally. The academy does not have any analysis of the students' predicted attainment in the sixth form this academic year.

The academy does not have analysis about the achievement of different groups at the secondary phase, such as any differences between the achievement of those eligible for the pupil premium and their peers.

In lessons, pupils' progress varied. In many lessons, pupils progressed steadily or well; in others too little progress was made. Pupils' books show that in some lessons they do not complete much work.

The quality of teaching

Most teaching seen during the visit required improvement and some was good. The work in pupils' books indicated that this is representative of the day-to-day teaching in the academy. Some inadequate teaching remains. Staff understand the urgent need for the overall quality of teaching to improve in order to raise standards, and many are committed to making sure that this happens quickly.

In the primary phase, the strongest teaching was carefully planned so that different pupils learnt at the right pace for them. Teachers expected pupils to concentrate on their learning from the very start of each lesson, and challenged them to reason, cooperate and explain their thinking, all of which pupils tried very hard to do. In these lessons pupils clearly enjoyed their learning. Where teaching was weaker, teachers asked pupils to do tasks that were too easy or too difficult. Pupils who quickly understood the concepts being taught were not given more challenging work to do; sometimes they were just given more of the same and other times were not given anything. Occasionally, teachers were not insistent enough on pupils working constantly through the lesson, and did not notice when pupils were off task.

Leaders have sensibly decided to change the approach to teaching writing in the primary phase. However, there are some issues with the teaching of reading. The way in which phonics (the sounds that letters make) is taught in Key Stage 1 is different to the way in which it is taught in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This leads to a lack of continuity in pupils' learning. Moreover, some of the books that pupils are reading in groups with teachers and teaching assistants are not interesting

enough and do not relate enough to pupils' own experiences or capture their imaginations.

In the secondary phase, the way in which classes are currently organised to include two year groups has a significant negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning in some lessons. The strongest teachers are skilful in planning for two year groups in a class at one time, and their careful tracking of what pupils have learnt helps to ensure that they make progress. However, in too many lessons, the older pupils are repeating work that they have already done, or being slowed by the questions asked by the younger pupils who are learning new skills or concepts for their first time. Sometimes the older pupils become bored, which hampers the progress for the younger ones.

How well behaviour is managed also has a significant impact on the quality of learning in the secondary phase. Where teaching is strongest, teachers have a good range of appropriate strategies to engage pupils in learning from the very start of the lesson. They set clear parameters for pupils, challenge those who are not cooperating, and ensure that the behaviour of some does not interfere with the learning of others. In these lessons, there are high expectations of what pupils can achieve in their learning. These expectations are clearly communicated to the pupils, who often rise to the challenge. Teachers convey interest in their subject and enthusiasm for pupils' responses. Where necessary, the teachers follow the academy's consequences policy. Praise is used judiciously to motivate and reward pupils.

Where the management of behaviour is weaker, teachers do not always set the right tone for the lesson. Pupils are allowed to opt out of working and to disrupt the learning of others. In these lessons, the work tends to be too easy or too difficult for some of the pupils and they react by causing low-level disruption. Sometimes the teachers try to use the consequences system but this has little effect. The combination of these factors means that the pupils in these lessons make little progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

At breaktime at the primary site, some pupils chatted, others played football and a few organised themselves into playing a game. A few Key Stage 1 pupils joined in eagerly with a game of hopscotch which was organised by a member of staff. However, overall there was too little for pupils to do. In the Key Stage 2 playgrounds the football games dominated the space. Although many pupils interacted sensibly, too many pupils in both Key Stages 1 and 2 engaged in rough play. At lunchtime pupils had more to occupy them and were particularly enjoying gardening.

At lunchtime on the secondary site, behaviour was calm. The site was well supervised, as was the dining room. Senior leaders, lunchtime supervisors and

teachers all talked to pupils and checked that they were safe. Pupils said that they felt much safer at lunchtimes now because of the high staff presence, and because football games are now confined to one area of the outdoor space. There is also a range of clubs and activities which pupils are able to take part in, which they enjoy. Pupils' general view of behaviour was that it had 'improved a lot' since last term.

In primary lessons, the pupils generally settled quickly and were enthusiastic about their learning. Occasionally, where they were not taught well, they became dispirited and discouraged and disturbed others. In secondary lessons, behaviour varied from motivated and cooperative in some lessons to openly defiant and disruptive in a small number. The vast majority of teachers are supportive of the new behaviour management system and are trying hard to use it.

Fixed-term exclusions in the secondary phase have fallen slightly since last term. However, there have been 12 permanent exclusions this academic year, which is exceptionally high. Overall attendance remains low but has started to rise.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The interim Principal has accurately identified what underpins some of the academy's weaknesses and has taken a range of well-chosen actions to tackle these. He has initiated a complete restructure of staffing, which is due to be implemented in September. Several key posts have already been filled. Importantly, most leadership posts in the structure include responsibility for secondary and primary aspects of the academy's work. The interim Principal has sensibly decided that, because of their negative impact on achievement, the mixed-age secondary classes will no longer exist from September. Staff are highly supportive of this decision.

The quality of the buildings and academy site continue to have a negative impact on the quality of learning. The interim Principal and one of the governors have successfully submitted a bid to the Education Funding Agency for £2,000,000 to help to improve the fabric of part of the academy.

Assessment data are not used well to track and analyse pupils' progress. A new data tracking system has been purchased, which leaders believe will enable assessment information to be analysed and used much more easily. Leaders understand that it will be essential to ensure that assessment information is accurate in order for the system to be useful, and know that there is work to be done with staff before it is.

Leaders have taken firm action to tackle the inadequate teaching that they have identified, and there is a range of support and coaching provided to teachers whose teaching is deemed to require improvement. A senior leader has worked well with middle leaders to improve their skills in judging teaching and supporting their team. Judgements about the quality of teaching are taking better account of the work in

pupils' books and there is beginning to be a better process for following up the areas for development that are identified in each lesson observation.

However, there is no clear procedure for identifying where teaching is regularly but not always inadequate or where teachers struggle to teach or manage the behaviour of particular classes. This means that pockets of inadequate practice are not being tackled systematically enough. Judgements on the quality of teaching do not take account of the data about pupils' progress over time. Behaviour and the management of behaviour are not commented on well enough in some lessons. Observations and behaviour data are not used well enough to identify where there are issues with teaching.

The academy is reviewing its sixth form provision with the intention of using other partners to provide much of the teaching from September 2014. Given the small size of the sixth form and the current outcomes, this is sensible.

Governors have become increasingly challenging to the academy, as well as continuing to support it in its improvement. After a recent review of governance they have reorganised themselves to provide 'link governors' to different senior leaders. This is giving them a more in-depth understanding of the work of the academy. Several of these governors have been into the academy to look at the area with which they are linked. For example one governor has carried out a useful learning walk alongside the leader of teaching and learning.

This academic year, governors have permanently excluded pupils at 10 times the national rate. Several governors have been involved in the processes for different pupils and the governing body does not have an overview of how many pupils have been excluded.

External support

A review of governance was carried out by a National Leader of Governance, which has guided governors to make some changes to the way in which they work.