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Dame Maureen Brennan
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Dame Maureen

Special measures monitoring inspection of Bloxwich Academy

Following my visit with Rob Hackfath, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 14 and 15 June 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 school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2015.

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 trust's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

The school's action plans are fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers without first discussing the proposal with me.

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 first monitoring inspection on 14 and 15 June 2016

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work on both the primary and secondary school sites. They met with the executive headteacher, the two associate headteachers, other senior and middle leaders, members of staff and pupils. They met with the chair of the governing body and another governor. The inspectors also looked at a range of documents.

Context

There has been a substantial turnover of staff at all levels since the inspection in November last year. The associate headteacher for the secondary phase took up post in December 2015. It is proving difficult to recruit to the post of deputy headteacher for the primary phase and the associate headteacher is the only senior leader in post at this time. Currently, a number of posts in both phases are filled on a temporary or supply basis because of vacancies and sickness absence.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Expectations have been raised across the school and there is a clear ambition to improve the school's performance as quickly as possible. The leadership of the secondary phase has been considerably strengthened. The associate headteacher and other members of the restructured senior team have brought a much-needed urgency, clarity and sense of direction. They have put in place interventions, systems and strategies to ensure progress is made and have set up robust systems for checking the impact. All leaders have taken on a teaching commitment, which means that they are also leading by example and not expecting anything of teachers that they are not willing to do themselves. Teachers appreciate the changes that have been made and understand what is being worked towards.

In the primary phase, the associate headteacher is shouldering a heavy leadership load, because of the lack of other suitably skilled and experienced leaders to share tasks and to strengthen the capacity for improvement. Nevertheless, the associate headteacher's drive for improvement is clear. She is dealing robustly with underperformance and insisting that all teachers meet high standards in their work. Middle leaders are being provided with training and guidance, jointly with leaders from the secondary phase, to help them strengthen the contribution they make to school improvement. There is no lack of enthusiasm from this group of staff, but their skills and expertise in leading others are underdeveloped.

There have been improvements to the curriculum in both phases. At secondary level, steps have been taken to make sure that every pupil in key stage 4 (apart from the current Year 11 who had already begun their courses) will now have the

opportunity to study the range of subjects needed for the English Baccalaureate. Sixth formers who have not attained a GCSE pass in English or mathematics at grade C or above are required to follow a course to improve their grade.

The associate headteacher has provided training and support for staff in the primary phase to increase their understanding of the approach to teaching mathematics that the national curriculum requires. Staff have been receptive to training, but observations in classrooms during this inspection showed that there is still work to do to make sure all teachers are equally skilled at implementing new ideas.

Improvements to leadership and the curriculum in the early years have stalled, because of the absence of the substantive post holder. One member of staff has taken on responsibility for oversight of the early years in the interim, but there remains a good deal to be done to drive improvements in Nursery and Reception at the speed that is needed.

The governing body is making sure to keep the school's progress under regular review. Reports provided by the associate headteachers are carefully scrutinised, as shown by the probing questions that are asked at meetings of the governing body. Governors and members of the trust did not subject the school's action plans to the same degree of challenge. Nor did they make sure that their statement of action was fit for purpose. The main weaknesses were a lack of appropriate, readily measurable targets that would track the school's progress towards the ambitious overall target of becoming a good school by the autumn term 2017. This has been partially remedied and the action plans have been suitably amended and are now fit for purpose. However, if the ambition to become a good school in a short space of time is to be achieved, leaders, governors and the trust need to understand the standards of performance that must be demonstrated by that time. They also need to set out clearly measurable interim measures that, if met, will show that the school is on track for its overall aim.

The recommended review of the school's use of pupil premium funding has not yet taken place. It is scheduled for the end of June 2016.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders' efforts are leading to improvements in teaching. Leaders have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching in both phases, gained through their monitoring activities including observations in classrooms and scrutiny of pupils' books. Where teachers do not meet the expected standard, they receive support and guidance that is tailored to their needs. Leaders do not shirk from hard messages where they are needed. Teachers across the school have welcomed the training and development opportunities they have received.

Effort has rightly gone into making sure that teachers' assessments of what pupils know and can do are accurate. In the secondary phase, predictions of what pupils

would achieve in their GCSE examinations were way off beam in 2015. This year, leaders are confident that the accuracy of assessment has improved a good deal. In the primary phase, assessments at the end of each key stage are moderated externally. Teachers also check their assessments with one another, especially at times of transition, to make sure that the receiving teacher knows and agrees with the assessments of pupils' attainment. The school has adopted a new system for assessing pupils' attainment and tracking their progress in the early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2. The system has not been up and running long enough to give a clear picture of how well pupils are progressing over time.

The improvements in the quality of information about what pupils know and can do mean that teachers are better placed to plan to meet their needs in lessons. Their success in meeting individual needs is still variable. In the secondary phase, this shows in the slower rate of progress for pupils who have special educational needs or disability.

In both phases, teachers are applying the school's policy for marking pupils' work and giving feedback on what needs to be done to improve it. Pupils have the opportunity to respond to marking and feedback in lessons. Older pupils say that they value this and it helps them to make their work better.

In the secondary phase, pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour in lessons and around the school have improved as a result of better teaching and the raised expectations of leaders. Staff also are consistent in applying the school's policy for managing behaviour. There is a much better climate for learning in lessons. Pupils' positive attitudes to learning and good behaviour in lessons and around the school remain strengths in the primary phase. As noted at the previous inspection, pupils concentrate well on their work and stay motivated.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

As noted above, the behaviour of older pupils has improved. This is in part a result of the dogged determination of leaders and staff to hold pupils to account for their actions. It also stems from the staff's consistency in using the school's behaviour policy. Pupils know what is expected of them in class and at other times. They are also beginning to understand that they are responsible for their own behaviour and actions. In the majority of lessons, the atmosphere is calm and purposeful. The vast majority of pupils have embraced the recent changes and are responding well to the school's raised expectations. Pupils wear their uniforms smartly and follow the new routines for moving around the site. Pupils and staff who spoke to an inspector during the inspection all said that behaviour has improved.

Pupils who are still struggling to meet the higher expectations of behaviour attend the school's satellite centre, rather than being excluded, wherever possible. The number of fixed-term exclusions has reduced as a result. Pupils return to the main school when they have successfully completed time in the satellite centre. Leaders

have not yet evaluated the impact of the use of the satellite centre on reducing the number of pupils who are required to attend the centre more than once. Internal truancy has reduced substantially.

Pupils in the primary phase continue to behave well. They demonstrate many positive attributes that will stand them in good stead in the future. For example, pupils are willing to work alongside and support one another. They cooperate well. During this inspection, one Year 4 class was rehearsing for a music examination. The whole class concentrated very well, listened intently to one another and cooperated successfully as they rehearsed the pieces that they were due to play.

Attendance in the primary phase is rising and is close to the national average for primary schools in 2015. As a result of a 'zero tolerance' approach to holidays in term-time and a consistent message to parents and carers, the proportion of pupils who are absent too often has reduced.

In the secondary phase, attendance has begun to increase as a result of leaders' efforts but is still below the national figure. Some groups of pupils, for example, those who are disadvantaged, do not attend as often as others. Leaders are working to close these gaps and are committed to achieving good attendance for all pupils.

Many pupils in both phases face challenging circumstances in their lives or are potentially vulnerable. A high degree of attention is paid to supporting pupils and their families and to ensuring that pupils are safe. Children who go missing from education are rigorously followed up and are not removed from the school's roll until their whereabouts are known.

Outcomes for pupils

There are some signs that outcomes for pupils are improving. Underachievement has been long-entrenched in the secondary phase. The results of GCSE examinations last year were exceptionally low. Leaders are determined to make sure that the pupils in the current Year 11 have every opportunity to make up some of the ground they have lost. They put into place a number of specific interventions to make sure that pupils in Year 11 were as well prepared as possible for their examinations. Pupils attended extra lessons to make sure that they covered all of the necessary content and that all elements of controlled assessments were completed.

Leaders have taken action to make sure that the quality and reliability of assessments have improved. This has included external checking of formal assessments and mark schemes and moderation of marking, arranged through the sponsor. These steps mean that assessment information is increasingly accurate. Current assessments show that the school's results are set to rise sharply this year. However, the pupils had so much ground to make up that it is not likely that the

school's performance will meet the government's floor standard. The strategies used to support Year 11 pupils have had a positive impact on the achievement of all groups of pupils, but the impact is less marked for pupils who have special educational needs or disability or who are disadvantaged.

It is not possible to compare the school's anticipated outcomes for pupils in Year 6 this year with the results of last year because of changes to the national curriculum and how it is assessed. The school is predicting that about 55% to 60% of pupils will meet or exceed the expectations for their attainment by the end of key stage 2 in reading, writing and mathematics. The proportion predicted to achieve this in all three subjects combined is likely to be lower. This is below the government's stated standard of 65%. This group of pupils' attainment was significantly below average when they completed Year 2.

Observations in lessons and scrutiny of pupils' books show that there are still gaps in some pupils' mathematical knowledge and understanding. Some pupils are not confident in their own abilities and do not show quick mental recall or fluency when tackling problems.

Outcomes for the end of the early years are also anticipated to be lower than those of last year, but not considerably so. This reflects differences in the cohort and an increasing rigour in assessments.

External support

The trust is providing the school with a good level of support, particularly through close working with Barr Beacon School, another member of the Matrix Academy Trust. Staff from Barr Beacon are supporting leadership in both phases. This support has had a positive impact and is valued by Bloxwich's leaders. In recognition of the limited primary expertise in the trust, links have been forged between the primary phase and Twickenham Primary School in Birmingham. The primary phase at Bloxwich is benefiting from this support, for example, in setting up assessment and tracking procedures.