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3 April 2017

Dame Maureen Brennan
Executive Principal
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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 Sandy Hayes, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 21 to 22 March 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Please pass on my thanks to the associate headteachers for the help they gave during the inspection and for the time they made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school 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 school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

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 third monitoring inspection on 21 March 2017 to 22 March 2017

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work on both the primary and secondary sites. They met with the associate headteachers, the consultant headteacher who is supporting the primary phase, other senior and middle leaders and members of staff. Inspectors spoke informally to pupils in lessons and around the school. They met the chair of the governing body and another governor. The inspectors also looked at a range of documents.

Context

There have been minimal changes in staffing in the secondary phase. Leaders have successfully recruited to a number of newly created posts. These include leadership of the sixth form, support for the leader of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and subject teachers. Several members of staff, including the associate headteacher, left the primary phase at the end of last term. A senior leader from another of the trust's schools is acting as associate headteacher. She is being supported full time by a leadership consultant from the Matrix Trust. A deputy headteacher took up post at the beginning of January and a number of staff have returned from long-term absence. The number of classes taught by temporary or supply teachers remains high. However, since January, there have been few changes. The headteacher of a successful school in another local authority is providing support for the development of early years provision. Teaching and learning in Year 6 are being supported by a specialist leader of education. A senior leader from another of the trust's schools provides support for the monitoring of teaching and learning across the primary phase.

The trust has changed the arrangements for governance in all of its schools. Local governing boards have been replaced by advisory boards that include members of the trust as well as representatives of the local community. The advisory boards will concentrate largely on teaching, learning, attendance and communication with parents. Other aspects such as personnel issues and finance will continue to be overseen by the trust.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders' and governors' actions continue to have a positive impact on the school's provision and outcomes. Strengths in leadership in the secondary phase have been maintained. Leadership capacity in the primary phase has been considerably enhanced by the recent appointments.

In the primary phase, the leadership team has got off to a strong start. Leadership responsibilities are now shared and as a result are manageable and realistic. Staff report that morale is high. Middle leaders understand clearly what is expected of them. They say that they have the support, time and training that they need in order to fulfil their responsibilities. They carry out monitoring activities, including looking at the quality of work in pupils' books. They have a growing understanding of strengths and areas for development in their areas of responsibility and are beginning to have an impact on teaching and pupils' outcomes.

Senior leaders in the secondary phase have established a culture in which leaders at all levels contribute to identifying strengths and highlighting where improvements can be made. Leaders relish the opportunities they have to develop strategies to deal with weaknesses. Middle leaders work alongside senior leaders to evaluate teaching. They triangulate their evidence using information such as that on pupils' progress and scrutiny of their work. Senior leaders make sure that departments have time to reflect on recent training and development. Staff evaluate how effectively they are responding to whole-school initiatives and the impact their practice has on pupils' learning. They also use these opportunities to share best practice within their subjects. Pastoral middle leaders make effective use of information about pupils' progress and attitudes to learning. They oversee form tutors who routinely mentor and develop targets with their tutees and monitor progress towards them.

Leaders understand that continuing improvement in teaching and its impact on pupils' outcomes are crucial. In both phases, leaders have an accurate and detailed knowledge of the quality of teaching. They provide support and challenge where weaknesses in teaching are identified or if pupils' progress is not as they expect. The support has proved effective and members of staff recently on support plans have improved their practice. Leaders are prepared to take more robust action should it be needed.

Improving disadvantaged pupils' success is a key priority. Secondary leaders have set targets for the performance of disadvantaged pupils. They have drawn up appropriate plans for how additional funding will be used to improve disadvantaged pupils' academic and pastoral outcomes. For example, the provision of additional teachers in core subjects means that teaching is more sharply focused on the needs of individual pupils. Leaders' published reports state clearly the impact of these measures. They do not explain how well disadvantaged pupils are doing compared with other pupils nationally, however.

The leader of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in the secondary phase has carried out a thorough review of systems and procedures in the primary phase. The arrangements for assessing the needs of individual pupils and providing for them have been strengthened as a result.

The early years is being led on a temporary basis in the absence of the post-holder.

An action plan for the future development of the early years has been drawn up. It deals with a number of important issues that were highlighted in a review carried out by the headteacher who is providing support.

Following feedback from the last monitoring inspection, the school has revised the approach to self-evaluation. There is now one self-evaluation document that includes evidence and judgements for all aspects of the school's work from early years through to the sixth form. It is now a more manageable tool for governors and leaders to use. Revisions have been made to the improvement plan for the primary phase but there is further work to do to make sure that targets and expectations for pupils' outcomes are consistent throughout.

Safeguarding has a high profile across the school. Procedures are clear. Staff are expected to be vigilant and bring issues, however small they may seem, to the attention of the safeguarding leader on each site. There is a comprehensive programme of training that is relevant and regularly updated. Leaders have a good understanding of challenges and issues in the local community and make sure that training includes these aspects. The amount of casework is considerable. Individual case files are well organised, but practice is not consistent across both sites, in that those in the primary phase do not contain a chronology or overview of events. This is being addressed. Safeguarding leaders have a good working relationship with local authority staff. The lead governor for safeguarding carries out regular audits of the school's safeguarding procedures and the responses made to individual issues. There is a strong emphasis across the school on teaching pupils how to deal with the risks they face in their everyday lives and to build their confidence, resilience and self-esteem.

The governing body and members of the Matrix Trust continue to provide appropriate support and challenge to the school's leaders. Minutes of meetings show that the information governors receive is not taken at face value and that probing questions are asked.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching continues to improve across the school. Improvements in the secondary phase have been sustained because teachers follow agreed strategies and their expectations of what pupils should achieve have been raised. Staffing is now more stable in the primary phase. All teachers have benefited from professional development activities that are closely tailored to the school's needs. Consistency is growing as a result.

There is a positive climate for learning in lessons and relationships between staff and pupils are strong. Pupils respond well to their teachers and complete their tasks

willingly, even when they are not particularly enthused by them. Occasionally, in response to lively, challenging and stimulating teaching, pupils sit up, their eyes shine and they are keen to engage in debate and put forward their ideas.

Teachers in the secondary phase regularly use the information they have about pupils' starting points to plan lessons. For example, to get the best out of the pupils, they decide where in the classroom pupils should sit, and create learning activities with different levels of challenge appropriate to pupils' prior attainment.

Nevertheless, there are still variations in teaching in both phases. For example, some teachers check skilfully how pupils are doing in lessons and move them on to more challenging activities as soon as they are ready. In these instances, pupils make swift progress. Not all teachers are equally skilled at this and as a result, pupils may be left completing tasks that do not challenge them sufficiently. There are also variations in the effectiveness of teachers' questioning. Some teachers use questions very well to check the understanding of individual pupils and use their responses to shape subsequent discussion. Others miss the chance to deepen pupils' understanding because their questions are superficial and pupils are not expected to explain their reasoning.

Developing pupils' literacy skills remains a key priority in the secondary phase. Leaders use the additional funding they receive well. For example, specialist staff provide pupils with additional teaching sessions. These strategies help pupils to catch up, improving their progress in reading and writing. Leaders are planning similar strategies for pupils who need to improve their numeracy skills, but these plans are in their early stages and have not yet had the same impact.

In both phases, teachers routinely share with pupils the content of the lesson and what they are expected to achieve. In the secondary phase, teachers make sure that pupils understand the skills they need to demonstrate if they are to reach higher grades in their examinations. In the primary phase, teachers' plans sometimes focus more on what pupils will do, rather than what they are expected to learn.

Teachers' expectations for how pupils will present their work in the primary phase are not always high enough. Pupils often write with blunt pencils and some books are scruffy, with bent corners and much rubbing out. Teachers do not routinely insist that pupils copy the day and date correctly, or that writing will sit on the line. Consequently, mistakes are repeated.

Swift action was taken following the previous monitoring inspection to strengthen teaching and improve learning in the early years. As a result, children are more settled and are focused on learning. Systems for observing children and for recording their attainment and progress have been strengthened. As a result, teachers know what children can do and what they need to learn next. There are still some gaps in children's records which indicate that assessments are

not yet carried out and evidence recorded as systematically as these should be.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils in both phases typically behave well both in lessons and around the school. Improvements noted at previous monitoring inspections have been sustained. Systems for promoting good behaviour and managing unacceptable behaviour are well established and consistently followed by staff. There are still a few pupils whose behaviour is sometimes challenging, but effective steps are being taken to help these individuals to manage their anger and respond more appropriately should they become distressed.

Secondary pupils are referred to the satellite centre for a range of purposes, including to prevent their exclusion from school. Staff accurately assess the needs of pupils who use this facility and ensure that the curriculum is personalised to meet their needs successfully. There is continuity between the work pupils complete in the satellite centre and that of their peers, increasing the opportunities for pupils to be reintegrated into the main school. The primary phase has recently established a 'success centre' to which pupils are referred by their teachers. Pupils receive support tailored to their individual needs.

Attendance continues to improve in both secondary and primary phases. Overall, attendance in the primary phase is broadly in line with that seen nationally in primary schools. Leaders in the secondary phase are constantly striving to come up with new strategies and incentives to encourage further improvement in attendance. For example, all pupils who have 100% attendance towards the end of the spring term have been promised an outing to a venue that they collectively choose. Currently, 257 pupils are in line to take part.

The marked improvements in attendance in the secondary phase noted at the last inspection have been sustained. However, disadvantaged pupils still attend school less regularly than others. Leaders are currently very close to reaching their target for overall attendance this year. They recognise that although this achievement would be a substantial improvement from previous years, attendance would still be well below national rates.

Reductions in the number of fixed-term exclusions have been maintained this term. However, leaders acknowledge that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities or are disadvantaged are more likely to be excluded than others. Permanent exclusions are falling as a result of targeted support such as mentoring pupils following their return to school.

Outcomes for pupils

Leaders have clear expectations for how much progress pupils should make in key stage 3. Their checks show that across a wide range of subjects, pupils' progress is fairly consistent. A higher proportion of pupils have reached the expected standard in French and religious education than in other subjects. Differences in progress between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are not increasing.

The school's assessment information suggests improvements in pupils' attainment in GCSE English, mathematics and science this summer. Leaders check their assessments with other schools, and teachers regularly check the consistency of how they grade pupils' work with other teachers. Leaders anticipate that the improved rates of progress seen last year will be bettered. Despite these gains, leaders think it is likely that progress will remain below that of other pupils nationally. Currently, pupils with high prior attainment, boys and pupils who are not disadvantaged make stronger progress. Leaders anticipate that pupils will make broadly similar progress in different subjects, apart from in mathematics. Steps are being taken to address this, including a daily focus to develop pupils' confidence in their mathematical skills.

Leaders' predictions for the performance of students currently in the sixth form indicate that the sharp improvements in attainment achieved last year are likely to be built on this year. They also expect differences between subjects will be ironed out. Leaders ensure that current sixth-form students without grades A*-C in GCSE English and mathematics prioritise these qualifications. Recent examination re-takes have yielded some success. In English, students made substantial progress towards their goals. However, there was more limited improvement in outcomes in mathematics.

The school's assessments show that pupils currently in Year 6 have made better progress from their starting points, overall, than the same year group last year in reading, writing and mathematics. This includes those pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils who are disadvantaged. The assessments show that the number of pupils working at age-related expectations is increasing in reading and mathematics.

Assessments of pupils' attainment in Year 2 show that the proportion reaching the expectations for their age is drawing close to the school's targets. However, the outcomes are likely to be below the national figures for last year. Around two thirds of the pupils are expected to reach the standard expected in the national phonics screening check. The school's assessments show that pupils have not made consistently strong progress across key stage 1, but that they have made steady progress from their starting points.

There are gaps in the assessments of children's attainment in the early years and some internal inconsistencies. This means that the accuracy of assessments cannot be assured. Leaders are working on this as a priority.

Work in pupils' books in some classes in the primary phase does not show strong progress over the course of this academic year. Pupils are largely moving forward at a steady rather than a swift pace, and so still have some catching up to do.

External support

The school continues to draw on support from other schools in the Matrix Trust and other external partners where it is needed. The support is having a positive impact. The primary phase in particular has benefited from the support provided by the trust, especially in strengthening leadership. The review of provision in the early years was insightful and meant that swift steps could be taken to deal with identified weaknesses. Links and the sharing of expertise between the primary and secondary phases continue to develop well.