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Mr Andrew Galbraith
Principal
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Dear Mr Galbraith

Special measures monitoring inspection of Highfield Leadership Academy

Following my visit with Sally Kenyon, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 12 and 13 February 2020, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in December 2018. 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 board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Blackpool. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2018.

- Improve urgently the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders make sure that arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective in creating a culture in which pupils are safe and feel safe
 - leaders take effective steps to minimise discriminatory behaviour and bullying across the school
 - teachers apply behaviour systems consistently to challenge and eliminate the poor and disrespectful behaviour of some pupils
 - leaders at every level, including those responsible for governance, have an accurate view of the quality of education that the school provides
 - leaders' decisions about the curriculum have a positive impact on pupils' progress at key stage 4 and are communicated clearly to pupils, parents and carers
 - middle leaders provide temporary staff with effective support to create an orderly learning environment
 - middle leaders provide temporary staff with effective support to organise pupils' learning effectively and fill the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding
 - leaders use additional funding effectively to make sure that disadvantaged pupils make at least the same progress as other pupils nationally.
- Improve immediately the provision for pupils' development and welfare by ensuring that:
 - pupils are confident that staff will listen to them and take their concerns seriously
 - pupils are confident that teachers will deal with incidents of bullying, including homophobic bullying, effectively
 - pupils are kind to each other and show respect and tolerance for their peers
 - pupils understand the negative effects of bullying and discriminatory behaviour.
- Rapidly improve pupils' behaviour by ensuring that:
 - pupils regulate their own behaviour around school without the need for high levels of staff supervision
 - pupils show respect for their teachers and follow instructions from staff
 - pupils refrain from swearing and using offensive language around school

- disruption in class is eradicated and pupils focus well on their learning
 - the attendance of all pupils, and particularly of disadvantaged pupils, continues to improve
 - pupils consistently arrive at school and their lessons on time.
- Improve the quality of teaching, so that pupils make the progress that they should in different year groups and in a range of subjects, including English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
- teachers have high expectations of pupils and insist on positive attitudes to learning
 - teaching is better planned to meet the needs of pupils, and particularly boys
 - teachers use assessment information to plan learning that challenges pupils, particularly those who are most able
 - teachers use information about what pupils know already to address the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding
 - plans to support pupils with SEND take sufficient account of individual special needs and staff have high expectations of what pupils with SEND can achieve.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 12 February 2020 to 13 February 2020

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised documents, including the self-evaluation document and rapid improvement plans. They met with the principal; an executive director of education from the trust; senior and middle leaders; groups of pupils; a group of teachers; and the chair and vice chair of the local governing body. The lead inspector held a telephone conversation with the chief executive officer of the trust. Inspectors made short visits to lessons, spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at pupils' written work. They also talked informally to pupils and observed how they behaved around the school. An inspector reviewed leaders' checks on the suitability of staff to work with pupils.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, 17 new appointments have been made to the teaching and support staff. These include four English teachers, three mathematics teachers, four science teachers, two teachers of computing, a religious education teacher and a modern foreign language teacher. Two new directors of learning took up their posts in September, in the areas of communications (English and modern foreign languages) and humanities. There is now a full complement of teaching staff in the school. In January this year an associate vice principal was appointed on a fixed-term contract. A permanent vice principal appointment will be made later this term.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

The curriculum at Highfield Leadership Academy is highly ambitious. It is designed to give pupils the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and experiences that they need to succeed in life. The curriculum reflects leaders' high expectations of what pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), can achieve. For example, leaders understand how important it is for pupils to acquire knowledge and skills in a modern foreign language throughout their five years in school.

There is no doubt that the overarching curriculum offer for pupils is ambitious and informed by a clear rationale. That said, currently, there is variability in the quality of curriculum design at subject level across the school. In many subjects, leaders have a very clear rationale for what pupils will learn and in what order. However, some subject leaders have not thought clearly enough about what knowledge and concepts pupils need to know and remember as they progress through the curriculum.

Since the last monitoring inspection, more pupils are benefiting from high-quality teaching. Many teachers present subject matter in a way that helps pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding. However, some teaching does not enable pupils to learn well. There is now a full complement of permanent teaching staff, but some key stage 3 pupils are still being taught by non-specialists.

These improvements to the curriculum and the quality of teaching came too late for the Year 11 pupils who left school in the summer. The gaps that they had in their knowledge, coupled with the legacy of poor teaching and leadership, meant that the progress that they made was well below average. This represented no improvement at all on the previous year's cohort. Indeed, pupils' attainment in English and mathematics in 2019 was worse than the previous year.

Teachers are working tirelessly to address the gaps that still exist in the current Year 11 pupils' knowledge and understanding. The Year 11 pupils really appreciate their teachers' efforts and are responding accordingly.

Leaders ensure that the curriculum provides a range of opportunities to support pupils' wider personal development. Providing positive and rewarding experiences for pupils is a high priority for leaders. Pupils have access to a wide range of enrichment activities. The curriculum also provides opportunities for pupils to be responsible citizens in the local community.

Staff and pupils speak very positively about the behaviour management system which was introduced after the last full inspection. It has proved to be a great success and pupils' behaviour has continued to improve. Most pupils now demonstrate positive attitudes to learning in lessons. Staff were keen to tell inspectors of the difference that this has made. One teacher described the school as 'unrecognisable' from a year ago. Another said, 'I can now enjoy my teaching.' Practically all pupils who spoke with inspectors highlighted behaviour as the biggest improvement. As one Year 9 boy said, 'I can now get on with my learning.'

Leaders have not just imposed compliance on pupils. They have worked with pupils to change the culture of the school. Most pupils now regulate their own behaviour and show kindness and respect to each other and the staff. The atmosphere during social times is calm. Positive relationships among peers and between pupils and staff are evident throughout the school. Pupils who spoke with inspectors were thoughtful, articulate and generally loyal to their school. They were particularly keen to tell inspectors how much they valued the support provided by the safeguarding team.

Further impact of leaders' actions in relation to behaviour can be seen in the reduction of fixed-term exclusions. There now remains only a small number of pupils whose behaviour is challenging. Plans are well on the way for the creation of an inclusion centre in school. Leaders believe that this will be an environment in which the needs of these pupils can be met more effectively.

Improving pupils' attendance continues to be high profile throughout the school. This has had some impact. For example, the number of pupils in all year groups with 100% attendance has increased. That said, overall absence rates remain high, particularly for pupils with SEND and those who are disadvantaged. The school was affected by a norovirus outbreak in the autumn term. However, even taking this into consideration, the school's attendance figures remain well below the national average.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The trust's commitment to this school is palpable. The trust's considerable investment of time, expertise and resources in the school has paid dividends. There has been an impressive amount of improvement in the past 12 months.

One of the trust's directors of education, and leaders from other schools in the trust, have provided the principal with invaluable support over the past year. This has now reduced considerably as the principal and his team are providing strong leadership across the school. This is appropriate for where the school is at on its improvement journey. The chief executive officer understands the importance of the school being 'owned by the community' as well as being part of the trust.

The principal has earned the support of the wider school community. He has provided much-needed stability for everyone. His genuine dedication and commitment are appreciated by staff, pupils and parents.

The rapid improvement plan continues to provide leaders with a focused way to monitor and evaluate the impact of their actions. Leaders have an accurate assessment of the school's strengths and areas that still require further improvement. They do not look to quick fixes to solve problems. Instead, they are adept at identifying underlying issues. For example, leaders have created a bespoke programme to raise the self-esteem of a group of boys who are struggling to manage their own behaviour. Another example is the investment that the trust has made in the proposed inclusion centre.

Leaders have created a culture in which staff feel supported. Teachers value the personalised coaching that leaders provide. There is evidence that this is leading to improved classroom practice. Whole-staff training has focused on general teaching strategies. However, not enough thought has been given to the subject-specific relevance of certain strategies. Subject training and development have not been a high enough priority for leaders. This is particularly significant as curriculum planning and implementation is currently inconsistent across the school.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders have created a highly ambitious curriculum. They have high expectations of all pupils, including those with SEND or who are disadvantaged.
- Improvements to the way that the curriculum is planned and implemented in many areas of the school are enabling pupils to know more and remember more.
- Leaders have created a culture in school that is based on respect and kindness. Pupils' behaviour in lessons and social times has continued to improve.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The work that leaders have done to improve the quality of education in the past year has not had an impact on improving outcomes for Year 11 pupils.
- The overarching rationale for the curriculum is well informed and ambitious. However, there is still some variability in the quality of curriculum design and implementation at subject level.
- Leaders' efforts to support pupils who do not attend school regularly have not had a sustained impact on improving attendance rates. This is particularly the case for pupils with SEND and those who are disadvantaged.

External support

The support that the school is receiving from the trust is proving to be highly beneficial. Consequently, the school has not needed to seek any further support from other external sources.