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5 February 2014

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 to your academy on 4 February 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 2013.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with you, four of the academy's senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, who is also the representative of the academy's sponsor, and three other governors. I carried out a learning walk on both the secondary and primary sites, where I visited classrooms and talked to pupils about their work. The sponsor's statement of action and the academy's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

The substantive Principal has left the academy and you began your role as interim Principal part way through November 2013.

The quality of leadership and management at the academy

Since taking on your role as interim Principal, you have taken a range of suitable actions. In this, you have been well supported by the senior leadership team, the sponsor and the governing body. You are all committed to improving the academy at a fast pace, while ensuring the improvements are sustainable in the long term.

Importantly, you have clarified the roles of the senior Vice-Principals and the Vice-Principals. Each is responsible for an area of the action plan. These leaders have worked quickly to put the action plans together and each is already able to demonstrate where actions have begun and where they have started to have an impact.

The academy has thought carefully about the need to ensure that judgements about the quality of teaching are not just made on the basis of lesson observations. When teachers are observed, they are now asked for assessment information for their classes, and observers look at books and talk to pupils. This has begun to strengthen the process of lesson observations; however it does not provide a complete triangulation of the overall quality of teaching in the academy.

You and senior leaders agree that the current system of grouping pupils across two year groups in the secondary phase is not working well enough. You have decided to remove this system by the start of September.

Moderation of the assessment of pupils' work has begun with some external support for the English department. Moderation across the academy is variable. There is some thorough practice in the primary phase and we discussed how primary and secondary staff could work together to improve the accuracy of assessment throughout the academy.

There are indications that behaviour has already begun to improve. You and the senior Vice-Principal in charge of this area have introduced a simplified behaviour management system. Importantly, this has a clear emphasis on praising and rewarding positive learning behaviours as well as on consequences for undesirable behaviour.

The 'five steps' charts clearly show pupils the steps to rewards and to sanctions, and were clearly displayed in the secondary classrooms visited during the inspection. In the primary classrooms and around the primary part of the academy, there were equally clear charts showing rewards and sanctions. Your monitoring of rewards and sanctions shows a clear pattern of improvement since January, with more positive behaviour and less negative. Exclusions have begun to decrease quickly. In the first half of the autumn term 2013, 348 sessions were lost to exclusion. This has fallen to 146 in the first half of the spring term, and leaders and governors are committed to decreasing this still further. No pupil has been excluded more than once since January.

You have identified that the system to track pupils' progress is unwieldy and does not easily provide the information you, leaders, teachers and governors need in order to analyse where pupils are making progress and where they are underachieving, and therefore to drive improvement. You have selected a new, simpler system which is about to be introduced.

You have designed a clear pro forma for each senior leader to record the impact of the actions they have taken, the evidence they will provide to demonstrate this impact and the next actions they will take. This is useful and is already helping to focus leaders on the need to demonstrate impact not just actions.

Both senior leaders and governors are very concerned about the state of the buildings in the secondary part of the academy. The buildings are deteriorating and need a great deal of maintenance to bring them up to standard. You and one of the governors have recently submitted a bid to the Education Funding Agency for substantial additional funds to improve the situation.

The governing body is well organised and clearly focused on the academy's improvement. Together, the governors have a range of useful skills and perspectives. A different member of the governing body has recently been linked to each of the areas of action in the action plan. They will meet with the senior leader responsible for each area to evaluate whether the actions are on track and having the required impact.

The academy currently has four newly qualified teachers and four Teach First teachers. There is a good programme of support in place for them. We agreed that if you want to appoint another newly qualified teacher we would discuss this in advance.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The academy, the sponsor and the governors have worked together to produce one statement of action and action plan. This is fit for purpose. The action plan identifies the actions that need to be taken and who will be carrying them out and the timescales are sensible. It is clear how the actions will be monitored, but less clear how the overall impact of these actions will be evaluated, and how evaluation by different people will feed into one coherent whole.

The action plan does not include a focus on the transition between Year 6 and Year 7, and there is not enough emphasis on how some of the good practice that exists in the primary phase will be shared with the secondary phase and vice versa. We discussed how this can be incorporated into the current plan to strengthen it further.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Education Funding Agency, the Academies Advisers Unit and the Director of Children's Services for Walsall. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector