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Mr Phil Hearne
Executive Principal
The Crest Girls' Academy
Crest Road
London
NW2 7SN

Dear Mr Hearne

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of The Crest Girls' Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 20 May 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. 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 was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in June 2013. 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 the serious weaknesses designation.

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

Yours sincerely

Carmen Rodney
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Make sure that all teaching is good or better by:
 - checking that all teachers use what they know about students' knowledge and understanding to plan high-quality lessons which are challenging for all abilities
 - reducing the number of lessons taught by short-term teachers
 - building in activities which develop students' confidence and spoken fluency
 - marking students' work using a consistent approach which clearly identifies specific areas for improvement.

- Raise the achievement of all groups of students by:
 - improving the progress and attainment of students in the sixth form, especially at AS level
 - ensuring that all teachers have the highest expectations of what all students can achieve
 - eliminating inconsistencies in achievement between different groups and subjects.

- Strengthen leadership and management at all levels, making sure that:
 - information about the progress of different groups is checked accurately across all subjects and used to assess the impact of teaching on improving students' progress, particularly in the sixth form
 - students are given clear and high-quality guidance about courses in the sixth form which suit their particular needs.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 20 May 2014

Evidence

The inspector met with: the Executive Principal and other senior and middle leaders; a group of students; parents; two senior members of staff from Highgate School, one of whom is a member of the governing body; the Principal Education Adviser from E-ACT; and the School Improvement Adviser from Brent local authority. A telephone conversation was held with a member of the governing body who also represents Brunel University and arranges support for the academy. The following documents were reviewed: the governors' recent evaluation of the development plan; monitoring of teaching and performance management; records of attendance and exclusions, including case studies on individual students; tracking information on students' progress; a review of teaching programmes; minutes of governing body meetings; and the business plan. The inspector looked at all aspects of the academy's work, including the capacity of leaders to sustain improvement. Short visits were made with two of the independent consultants to observe teaching in nine lessons.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, one member of staff has left the academy. A substitute teacher has taken over the teaching responsibilities. The head of sixth form will be leaving at the end of this term. Three interim senior leaders were appointed at the start of September 2013. Four part-time consultants were also appointed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Senior leaders and governors are currently in the process of recruiting permanent members of staff, including a head of the sixth form.

The governing body has received formal confirmation from the Department for Education that the academy will merge with Crest Boys' Academy to form one academy, called The Crest Academies. The provisional opening date for the new academy has been set for 1 September 2014.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The Executive Principal is committed to driving improvement and his energetic leadership is characterised by his clear articulation of the strategic priorities for the academy. The vision for improvement is very clear and has contributed to parents, students and staff recognising that he has done much to improve the academy in a short time. All staff recognise the importance of high quality teaching. Parents describe the Executive Principal's work as 'relentless', and they feel that the quality of communication with them is much improved. They say that the academy has been transformed. They feel that their children are safe and the immediate community is increasingly endorsing the academy's work. The Executive Principal is

well supported by the other senior leaders and has matched their expertise to the areas of work for development.

The senior leaders are committed to raising standards of attainment for all groups of students. Senior leaders and governors have kept to the improvement plan despite working difficulties they have reported with the sponsor. For example, they have not been able to recruit key staff to implement in full the action plan for September 2014 because money identified for the academy's expenditure has not been agreed by the sponsor.

From the outset, the academy has used a range of initiatives to develop the quality of teaching. Increased monitoring, training and coaching for staff have been used effectively to reduce the previously high proportion of teaching that was not good enough. The target to eradicate inadequate teaching has been achieved early and more teaching is now good or better. Senior leaders remain uncompromising; they recognise that good quality practice is not yet sufficiently embedded to enable students to achieve consistently well.

Leaders and managers are using effective systems to monitor the academy's work in holding staff to account for students' achievement. Robust use of performance management has resulted in moving on staff where necessary. Use of information to track students' progress is well established. Regular collection and analysis of this information have led to increased accountability at all levels. Careful monitoring is enabling leaders to identify and support any students at risk of underachievement.

Strong partnership work with external partners – in particular, Highgate School, Brunel University and the local authority – has contributed to raising students' aspirations and improving their attainment through a range of practical and academic projects. For example, Highgate School is successfully helping to increase the reading ages of students with low reading scores. Additionally, valuable partnership work between the science departments has improved the quality of teaching and is extending the most able students in this subject. Students refer to the input from Highgate as 'sophisticated'.

The development plan, which is in three phases of transforming the academy, is well considered. Areas for development are carefully identified and actions linked to regular monitoring and evaluation. This is enabling senior leaders and governors to measure progress and make adjustments, as necessary, to ensure that identified milestones and success criteria are achieved in the required timescale. Directors of learning are increasingly involved in monitoring teaching and students' achievement but senior leaders know they are not yet all effective. Governors use their wealth of expertise in education, law, business and finance to challenge and support the academy's leaders. They plan strategically and are vigilant when interrogating the performance of students and the effectiveness of senior leaders in driving improvement.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Senior leaders' relentless focus on developing teaching has led to more being good or better. Good teaching now includes practices that are linked to the national Teachers' Standards. For example, planning is now better structured; students say that work is challenging and teachers have higher expectations. Teachers are using questioning more effectively to evaluate students' learning. Students are also given opportunities to develop their communication and reading skills in lessons. Marking is now more regular and diagnostic and is helping students to understand how they can improve their work. Senior leaders, correctly recognise that the quality of marking is not yet good enough in all subjects.
- The academy has reduced the number of substitute teachers.
- The progress of students is kept under scrutiny through the regular use of 'data harvest' – this is the academy's approach to gathering assessment information on students' achievement. The information is well managed and analysed so that the achievements of different groups are interpreted accurately and all have the same opportunities to achieve well. The academy uses information on students' progress meticulously to ensure that GCSE and advanced level courses are appropriate. More work-related courses are now offered in the sixth form to better meet the needs of students. As a result, retention is higher and students have expressed greater satisfaction. Further changes are planned for September 2014, when the academy will develop an online programming GCSE course with Brunel University supporting the new examination course.
- Internal analyses of tests and examination results have led to an increased emphasis on developing students' literacy and numeracy skills. For example, specialist teaching assistants are well deployed. A short but intensive English language course is used to induct and develop the language skills of students at the early stage of learning English. This is helping them to settle into the academy quickly. Further projects on enterprise are planned to increase students' motivation and engagement in their learning when they enter Year 7.
- Much has been done to develop the pastoral system. Dedicated heads of year who do not have teaching commitments are able to respond immediately to any concerns about the well-being of students. As a result, exclusions have fallen and punctuality and attendance have improved in most year groups.
- Effective programmes designed to raise aspirations and meet the needs of the most able students are used well to motivate them, particularly as they are given opportunities to work alongside mentors in the city.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Persistent absence is still too high, particularly in Year 11. Despite the use of fines and the involvement of the education welfare officer, a very small minority of students do not attend regularly. Attendance at religious festivals and other factors beyond the academy's control continues to affect attendance. Case studies show that the academy provides a good range of early help including work experience and support for students with medical conditions.
- Senior leaders and governors are spending too much of their time dealing with administrative matters linked to the move to the new building.
- The sponsor has not provided senior leaders and governors with the support needed to ensure the smooth running of the academy. Administrative information is not provided in a timely or transparent manner. Senior leaders and governors are unsure about how decisions that affect the academy are made by the sponsor. Additionally, the planned expenditure has not been agreed by the sponsor. The Executive Principal and the governors say that the step-change required to secure rapid improvement has been jeopardised. The sponsor has been slow in providing quality support and advice to assist the academy to improve further. The basic service level agreement setting out the services that the sponsor should provide is not used. These shortcomings undermine the academy's plan to sustain the improvements made.
- The Principal Education Adviser from E-ACT knows the strengths and weaknesses of the academy very well and has used his insight to provide both challenge and support for senior leaders. However, whilst this support remains, it is not clear how the sponsor will continue to meet its obligations to the academy. Issues around the academy's capacity at senior level persist. This is because the impact of the restructuring of E-ACT on the services it should be providing to the academy is unclear. This period of uncertainty presents many challenges for the academy.

External support

The local authority has continued to maintain good links with the academy. Two valuable joint pieces of work have contributed to improving the quality of provision for identified groups of students. First, the work on auditing provision for disabled students and those who have special educational needs has resulted in a 20% reduction in the number of students identified as needing support for special educational needs. Second, ongoing work in the sixth form indicates improvement in the quality of teaching, information, advice and guidance, and behaviour and attitudes. Partnership work has also led to improvements in meeting the needs of sixth form students by the creation of smaller groups to ensure students are receiving the support they need.