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2 October 2014

Mr Matthew Wood
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wood

Special measures monitoring inspection of University of Chester Academy Northwich

Following my visit to your academy with Associate Inspector Heather Mullaney on 30 September and 1 October 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which 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:

The academy is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint NQTs.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State and the Chair of the Statement of Action Committee.

Yours sincerely

Patrick Geraghty
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2014

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching across the academy so that it is at least good or better, in order to raise attainment and accelerate progress in all subjects, by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching
 - ensuring that all data about how well students are learning are accurate, and that teachers use it to plan lessons which challenge all learners to make at least good progress
 - setting ambitious targets for students, particularly the most able, in order to raise teachers' expectations of what they can achieve
 - ensuring that teachers assess students' work accurately, and improve the effectiveness of their marking and feedback so that all students know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve
 - ensuring that students' literacy skills are systematically developed across the curriculum
 - Identifying bespoke training programmes for individual teachers to specifically help them improve their teaching skills.

- Improve behaviour so that students' attitudes to learning are always positive and enable them to make more rapid progress in lessons.

- Increase the effectiveness of both senior and middle leaders on improving teaching and achievement by:
 - ensuring that the systems which are in place to check on how well the academy is performing are robust, accurate, and used to identify clear priorities and actions
 - ensuring that leaders use the full range of available information, including students' progress and work in their books, when judging the quality of teaching
 - ensuring that all subject leaders and teachers are rigorously held to account for the progress of students
 - developing effective strategies for sharing the good and outstanding practice which exists within the academy.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 30 September to 1 October 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior leaders, heads of department, groups of teachers and pupils, the Chair of the Statement of Action Committee and representatives of the sponsor. Several learning walks were conducted as well as joint observations with senior leaders. Inspectors watched behaviour around the academy.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in May 2014 a new vice principal has been appointed. A vice principal from the Strategic School Improvement Partner has been seconded to the senior leadership team for four days a week. An internal appointment to the post of assistant principal has been made. A new Chair of the Statement of Action Committee has been appointed.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The academy's unvalidated data for GCSE examinations in 2014 indicate that results have improved for grades A* to C when compared to 2013 and 2012. Academy records indicate that these students made better progress in mathematics and a range of subjects. Progress was less marked in English. The achievement and progress gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers remain a concern. The most able students are not making sufficient progress or seeking to excel because of a culture of low expectations and aspirations in too many lessons. Inspection evidence from analysing school data, discussions with students and observing lessons show that students continue to underperform in some key subject areas. Academy leaders acknowledge that improvement at GCSE level must be more rapid. The promotion of literacy across the curriculum remains too variable.

The quality of teaching

The quality of students' learning and the progress they make is too variable across subjects. In a significant minority of lessons students did not make sufficient progress because their aspirations were low and the teachers' expectations for them were limited. These lessons were characterised by a poor use of prior assessment to plan activities so as to meet the needs of all students. Tasks were not always explained fully. Lesson activities did not encourage students to express their ideas and present solutions. The most able students were not encouraged to excel.

Lessons in which students made good progress were characterised by well planned and organised activities and a zest and passion for the subject. In these, students were fully engaged in the learning activities, responded well to prompts from both the teacher and peers and developed their own ideas. Standards of work were high. Such traits characterised lessons in drama, dance, art, physical education and mathematics.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students' behaviour around the academy is very good; they are polite and cooperative with each other and adults. Attendance is high and punctuality to lessons is good. Exclusions are low. Some students did express a wish for greater acknowledgment of individual achievement and the need for a clear rewards system to recognise high achievement, good work effort and a strong contribution to the academy community. HMI is of the view that the academy should promote more ways to engage students to become active participants in the development of a stronger aspirational and improvement culture.

The academy's work to keep students safe and secure is good. Students do not see bullying as a significant issue. They say that when it occurs it is quickly and effectively dealt with and any issues are resolved. Students feel safe. They have a good understanding of safety concerning their own health and well-being because these aspects are covered in the curriculum and emphasised through the pastoral system. Uniform dress codes are good and students expressed pride in their appearance. However, there persists in a minority of lessons low-level disruptive behaviour which has a negative impact on the learning of students. Students know how to behave well but they simply choose not to do so on some occasions.

The quality of leadership and management of the school

The pace of progress in tackling the areas for improvement cited in the academy's inspection report in February 2014 has been too slow. A lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders has had an impact on the speed of applying strategies to improve the performance of the academy. Initiatives to increase the effectiveness of both senior and middle leaders on improving teaching and achievement remain at an early stage of development. Academy leaders acknowledge that the pace of change to enable accelerated improvement needs to be quickened. The new Chair of the Statement of Action Committee is bringing a strong, critical and robust challenge to senior leadership and academy performance.

There have been significant changes to academy leadership in recent months, however, there persists a lack of clarity in senior roles and responsibility. A number of staff commented to inspectors that they were unsure about the roles of individual senior leaders and who and on what they lead. Some senior leaders commented that while they 'managed' they were unsure that they 'lead'. Clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the senior team needs to be agreed between the sponsor, governing body and senior leadership team quickly so that senior leaders drive improvement, higher expectations and aspirations together and with lucidity.

The inspection report of February 2014 asked the academy to undertake an external review of the use of the pupil premium in order to improve this aspect of leadership and management. This has not been undertaken. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers continues to be a concern. HMI strongly recommends that a review is undertaken with alacrity.

The Strategic School Improvement Partner commenced support with the academy on 1 September 2014; already there has been impact. Data, monitoring and tracking systems have been re-focused and tightened. Systems for scrutinising performance have been improved and strengthened. Plans are being implemented to strengthen the role of middle leaders by increasing their accountability and impact on the management of their areas of responsibility. Work is ongoing to embed and strengthen systems that ensure robust analysis of performance informs the ways and means to secure rapid improvement. The Strategic School Improvement Partner is now starting to focus on classroom practice and improvement in those subject areas that are underperforming or where student progress is not accelerating at a sufficient pace. Many staff commented that they welcomed the new approaches and emphasis on teaching, learning and professional development.

External support

The Strategic School Improvement Partner is offering strong support and a clear agenda for improvement in promoting more effective quality assurance systems and in tackling underperformance in academy provision. The sponsor has strengthened its own team to support the academy in recognition that changes are required within a more urgent time frame.