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12 February 2015

Mr A Kirby
Headteacher
Mesty Croft Academy
St Luke's Road
Wednesbury
WS10 0QY

Dear Mr Kirby

Special measures monitoring inspection of Mesty Croft Academy

Following my visit with Jonathan Moore, Additional Inspector to your academy on 10–11 February 2015, 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 June 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures

The academy development plan remains not fit for purpose.

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, the Chair of the board of directors and the Director of Children's Services for Sandwell and as below.

Yours sincerely

Brian Cartwright
Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – (including where a school is an academy)
- For the Secretary of State use the following email address:
CausingConcern.SCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk
- Contractor providing support services on behalf of the local authority - where appropriate
- Diocese – for voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form
- DfE - Academies Advisers Unit [open.FREESCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk] - for academies, free schools, UTCs and studio schools
- The person or body responsible for appointing foundation governors if the school has a foundation
- The lead and team inspectors.

Annex

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

- Ensure teaching enables all groups of pupils to make at least good, and where necessary very rapid progress, so that attainment is at least average in all year groups for reading, writing and mathematics by making sure teachers:
 - accurately identify the learning needs of individual pupils
 - match targets and learning activities to pupils' needs
 - ensure targets and activities are sufficiently challenging
 - show pupils clearly how well they are doing, give precise guidance on how they can improve and ensure pupils act upon the advice given.

- Close the gaps in attainment between pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium, more-able pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs and their classmates in reading, writing and mathematics by:
 - tracking the progress and attainment of all pupils precisely and focusing teaching on closing gaps
 - making comparisons between different groups in the academy and with pupils nationally so that all pupils achieve as well as they can
 - identifying pupils who are falling behind and taking immediate action to help them catch up
 - checking that all additional help given is having sufficient impact.

- Increase the impact of the academy's actions on reducing the absence rates of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs so that attendance for all groups of pupils is at least at the national level.

- Improve the impact of leaders at all levels upon the achievement of all groups of pupils by making sure that:
 - lessons in mathematics, writing and reading are sequenced in a way that systematically builds pupils' skills and understanding
 - performance targets for teachers reflect ambitious expectations for attainment and progress
 - teachers have the skills needed to understand and meet all pupils' learning needs in reading, writing and mathematics
 - checks on teaching are rigorous and use evidence from pupils' books and information from the academy's tracking system to make accurate judgements about its quality

- leaders use these checks to give teachers specific guidance on how to improve pupils' learning and routinely check that teachers have followed this advice.

- Improve the effectiveness of the board of directors in ensuring that all groups of pupils achieve well by making sure that directors:
 - use information about pupils' achievement in the academy and nationally to build an accurate picture of the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement
 - know about the achievement of different groups of pupils, particularly those who are eligible for the pupil premium, more-able pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs
 - challenge leaders rigorously where they identify possible underachievement
 - ensure that decisions about salary increases for all staff are linked to how well pupils achieve.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10-11 February 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the head and deputy head teacher, other senior leaders and middle managers, teachers, some parents, members of the board of directors and spoke with the head of the supporting primary school. Inspectors visited 19 lessons, scrutinised pupils' work, looked at records of meetings, development plans and records of directors meetings.

Context

There have been no changes to staffing or the academy status.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Pupils' achievement in lessons and in their work shows signs that the decline in standards has been arrested. Academy internal assessment data shows attainment gaps between different groups of learners, particularly disadvantaged pupils and other pupils, are now stable for most years and for most subjects.

The quality of teaching

Inspectors' observations show a measurable improvement in teaching since the previous inspection, in that no inadequate teaching over time was evident at this visit. In the majority of lessons, teachers are assigning tasks of differing difficulty to pupils according to pupils' prior academic attainment. In some lessons, those tasks are not challenging enough or given early enough to maximise progress, especially for the most-able pupils.

In mathematics, as a matter of routine, there are three levels of 'challenge', and often pupils can choose which one. Work in their books, however, suggests that much of the time it is not challenging enough, because pupils are getting all the tasks correct. The mathematics leader has spotted this and is training teachers to 'sign-off' pupils as mastering a skill without the need for extensive repetition. The changes to the academy-wide approach to reading and writing are too recent to detect significant impact. Nevertheless the volume of writing is increasing, especially since the start of this term, and there are signs of improving quality. Because teachers are now using 'topic' content as a stimulus for writing, for example in science, pupils are enjoying writing much more. This was evident in a Year 2 class where pupils were writing about owls, having had the excitement of actually seeing a tame eagle owl that had been brought into the academy. They were trying very hard to make a 'facts about owls' report, using their own experience and reading-age adapted information sheets. Writing for pleasure is a major step forwards because of its potential to quickly raise writing standards over time.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The overall attendance of pupils is rising slowly, with the attendance of some vulnerable groups improving quickly. Persistent absence is reducing and the academy has referred some families to court to address serious unauthorised absence. In lessons, pupils of all ages are particularly good at getting on with their work and take responsibility for their own and others' learning very seriously. Break and lunchtimes are lively and good natured. Pupils continue to adopt safe practices and the opportunities for play and socialising contribute well to pupils' overall good social, moral and physical development.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The capacity of the academy to secure improvement unaided by external partners remains weak. The directors have dispensed with the services of an independent school improvement partner and not replaced that function. The academy development plan is predominantly about provision and still lacks sufficiently clear time-limited performance measures. In combination it means directors are not able to see if the provision is bringing about better outcomes and now they do not have an independent view to guide them. The minutes of the December 2014 teaching and learning sub-committee commented that 'the only thing lacking at the moment is data'. Both the chair and vice chair of that committee were not in attendance due to illness. Minutes of the meetings of board of directors show little challenge to academy leaders.

Directors are not addressing the recommendations of the review of governance quickly enough. For example, suggestions from several external observers to re-constitute and streamline the structure of the board have not been taken up although they are 'thinking about it'. Any reduction in numbers is being left to 'natural wastage' because there is no clear long-term strategic plan for the structure and governance of the academy. As a consequence, the board of directors is liable to make sudden changes of policy, based on well-meant suggestions, rather than based on evaluative analysis of what is needed to meet the requirements of the plan. For example, the directors are thinking of restructuring the way support staff operate, but there is no clear formal evaluation of why that might be necessary, or the objectives that should be met as a result. Teachers do not know what the academy's vision is, although directors have reviewed the mission statement.

It is not clear whether directors are receiving the (good) reports of middle managers. The minutes record a comment that 'directors do not need to know everything about the academy', which raises concerns about how well some directors understand their statutory responsibility to hold the academy to account. For example, some formal academy policies contain recommendations that have not been adopted in practice, and directors were unable to explain why.

There are some emerging strengths in the day-to-day leadership of the academy. The good co-ordination by the deputy head of teacher training and visits to Manor Primary has helped teachers recognise that support is available, pertinent and relevant to their own practice. Middle leaders are now regularly monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning of English and mathematics. These evaluations are at a detailed class-by-class level and contain evidence-based suggestions for improvement. The evaluations are informative and should provide strategic leaders with a detailed and ongoing measure of teaching quality over time. They also identify the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils and those with disabilities and special educational needs. There is a new assessment and tracking system in place which shows the attainment of all pupils, and group of pupils, at each assessment point. The system still needs pre-populating with pupils' starting points, so that teachers can compare current pupil attainment with what it ought to be.

A new mathematics curriculum has started, designed to improve progression through the year groups over time. A review of the teaching of writing has driven a change to the previous approach, resulting in a noticeable increase in the amount of writing pupils are now doing on a daily basis. A similar rethink on reading has led to a brand new reading scheme designed to connect early years better with Key Stage 1, and provide a whole-academy reading scheme to help drive up reading standards consistently.

External support

The partnership with Manor Primary school in Wolverhampton is helping to engage teachers with pertinent professional development; the impact of this is clear in a common approach to marking, of generally good planning of lesson activities to match the prior attainment of pupils, and a sense of common purpose across the academy through shared planning and training sessions.

Please send this letter to relevant ISP

Once the academy has had 24 hours to report any factual inaccuracies, the post-inspection letter is copied as appropriate to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – (including where a school is an academy)
- For the Secretary of State use the following email address:
CausingConcern.SCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk
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- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form– for academies use the following email address: ACADInspectionReports@ypla.gov.uk
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school is a non-maintained special school
[\[hns.efa@education.gsi.gov.uk\]](mailto:hns.efa@education.gsi.gov.uk)
- Diocese – for voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools
- DfE - Academies Advisers Unit [open.FREESCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk] - for academies, free schools, UTCs and studio schools

- The person or body responsible for appointing foundation governors if the school has a foundation

The letters should also be copied electronically to each member of the inspection team.

A copy with editing marked up should be forwarded to the lead inspector.