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6 March 2015

Mrs Cath Green
Interim Principal
University of Chester Academy Northwich
Shipbrook Road
Rudheath, Northwich
Cheshire
CW9 7DT

Dear Mrs Green

Special measures monitoring inspection of University of Chester Academy Northwich

Following my visit with Tudor Griffiths, Additional Inspector, to your academy on 4 and 5 March 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 third 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers.

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 third monitoring inspection on 4 and 5 March 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Interim Principal, senior leaders, heads of departments, groups of teachers and pupils, the Chair of the Statement of Action Committee, the Executive Principal and representatives of The University of Chester Academies Trust. Several learning walks were conducted with senior leaders as well as lesson observations which focused on English, mathematics and science. Inspectors watched behaviour around the academy.

Context

The academy Principal resigned in October 2014 and an Interim Principal from a sister academy of The University of Chester Academies Trust was appointed with immediate effect. Subsequently, the roles and responsibilities of the senior leadership team have been reorganised. A new head of English took up post in November 2014. Further teaching staff have been appointed to build capacity within the academy.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Senior leaders have continued to build upon the overall improvement in GCSE results in 2014/15. Current academy records and data indicate that students are making better progress at both key stages. Assessment and progress data are better focused and fine-tuned so as to enable improved lesson planning and a greater emphasis on individual student intervention strategies. Teachers and middle leaders are more familiar with data and now have computers to access and evaluate data trends for their classes and departments. Heads of department and class teachers can now identify pupil premium (additional government funding) students and plan lesson activities and extension work accordingly so as to close achievement and attainment gaps more quickly. Senior leaders are realistic and acknowledge the need to accelerate and sustain improvements in achievement at both key stages.

There is increasing evidence of a stronger focus on literacy, writing, numeracy and oracy skills throughout the curriculum. This now needs to be embedded further. Student reading ages in Year 7 and 8 are improving. However, a reading for pleasure culture has yet to be embedded more fully.

The quality of teaching

While the quality of teaching and learning remains variable across the curriculum there is growing evidence of an increase and strengthening of good practice. Good and challenging learning was observed in English, mathematics and art. Where activities challenge students and match their abilities students excel and engage

enthusiastically. Inspectors were particularly impressed with the enthusiasm, imagination and insightfulness of some students in Years 7, 8 and 9. Academy leaders recognise the need to challenge the most able so that they excel across the whole curriculum offer.

The marking of students' work, while still remaining variable across the curriculum, has improved significantly. Teachers mark regularly and many make insightful comments that help students understand the next steps in their learning. Students spoke enthusiastically of how marking had improved and of the impact of dialogue, both written and oral, with teachers and how this has enabled them to make better progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Student behaviour is good. They are well mannered and courteous to adults. They conduct themselves in an orderly manner around the academy site. They are respectful of each other and polite to visitors. Students want to learn and have an increasingly positive work commitment and ethos. They are 'buying into' the new academy ethos of high aspirations and hard work. Students feel safe in the academy. Attendance and punctuality are good. Students' participation in academy life is increasing. Inspectors discussed with academy leaders the need to respond imaginatively to this growing student culture of enthusiasm for learning and a desire to embrace greater responsibility and challenge.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

In the second monitoring inspection inspectors raised concerns over the clarity of senior leadership roles and responsibility and the pace of improvement across the academy. Academy leaders have moved with speed to tackle these issues. The new Interim Principal has streamlined and reorganised senior leadership roles. This has brought both a clarity, purpose and focus to senior management. Improvement planning and objectives are better focused. Improvement objectives and lines of accountability have been made clear to all staff. Systems to track, monitor and evaluate all provision have been strengthened. Staff told inspectors that they fully support recent changes and expressed strong confidence in the senior leadership. The refocused and energised senior leadership team have the capacity to move the academy rapidly forward.

The accountability and responsibilities of middle leaders have been clarified and strengthened. Middle leaders are now working more effectively within their departments and as a team. They have a renewed sense of confidence and direction. Data information and communication to staff have been improved and, consequently, staff are now more able to plan their lessons and learning activities more effectively.

A review of pupil premium funding has been undertaken. The review was highly critical of academy practice. There was no systematic evaluation and analysis of the impact of funding. School leaders have moved with alacrity to establish new approaches to additional activities and interventions and systems for tracking and evaluating the impact of funding. Pupil premium-funded students are now known to staff and, consequently, staff can plan and monitor these students' learning activities and progress.

Central to the instigation of a transformed culture of high aspiration and expectations has been the contribution of the Executive Principal. He has been the fulcrum for implementing rapid and profound changes. His wisdom, experience of outstanding practice and dynamic drive has ensured that the academy has moved forward rapidly. Coupled with this has been the impact of the relatively new Chair of the Statement of Action Committee. The committee members meet fortnightly. They have an eagle eye on academy progress across all aspects of provision. The Chair drives their robust and supportive approach to holding senior leaders to account. They have a very realistic view of the challenges ahead and of the need to embed and sustain any improvement achieved.

External support

The network meetings provided by the teaching school alliance has played a crucial role in developing high-quality and well focused continuous professional development for academy staff. Middle managers from across the trust meet regularly to discuss issues within their departments and areas of responsibility. Academy staff are highly complimentary about the value of these network connections.

The University of Chester Academies Trust has refigured and streamlined its own organisational structure. This has now given greater focus to the critical support needed by the academy to accelerate improvement and change its learning culture.