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5 June 2015

David Brown
Interim Executive Headteacher
Al-Hijrah School
Cherrywood Centre
Burbidge Road
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Dear Mr Brown

Special measures monitoring inspection of Al-Hijrah School

Following my visit with Linda Jacobs and David Turner, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 3–4 June 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013. 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 school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next inspection.

As identified at the last monitoring inspection, up to four newly qualified teachers may be appointed if advice and support are provided by a senior leader whose quality of teaching is consistently good or better.

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 Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Howie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by making sure that:
 - the work pupils are given to do in all year groups and in all subjects is accurately and consistently matched to their needs and abilities
 - teachers use assessment data accurately to plan for pupils' next steps in their learning
 - disabled pupils and those with special educational needs receive appropriate support in lessons
 - teachers have access to and use the resources that they need to teach the whole curriculum, engage pupils' interest and help them make good progress.

- Improve the progress of pupils in the primary school by:
 - ensuring teaching programmes are pitched at the appropriate level for pupils of different needs and abilities and sequentially build on their skills year-on-year
 - identifying where there are gaps in pupils' learning and taking urgent and effective action to close them
 - urgently agreeing an action plan for improving pupils' writing skills.

- Improve behaviour and safety by:
 - developing strategies to tackle bullying and poor behaviour and train staff in their implementation
 - making sure all staff have high expectations of good behaviour
 - ensuring staff model good behaviour and respect for all pupils at all times
 - making sure that pupils consistently experience teaching that motivates them and leads to better attitudes to learning.

- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers, including governors, by:
 - ensuring that tracking and monitoring procedures are systematic and enable leaders to check that pupils are making sufficient progress
 - ensuring that procedures to identify and support disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are robust and that action taken to support these pupils is more effective
 - providing middle leaders with the professional development needed to carry out their roles effectively and establishing a framework that will enable them to check the quality of teaching in their subjects
 - improving the curriculum across the school so that it better meets the needs of all pupils, provides more varied and interesting activities, ensures a better balance between the time allocated to English and mathematics and other subjects and offers more option choices for older pupils
 - using the additional funding for primary sport more effectively

- ensuring that the governing body's work is informed by a clear and well directed vision, that it develops a strategic role and holds leaders to account for their actions
- ensuring finances are managed appropriately, effectively and efficiently
- implementing the recommendations arising from the recent audit of governance.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 3–4 June 2015

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the interim executive headteacher, the interim associate headteacher, the senior and middle leaders, the two consultant headteachers working in the primary phase, and two members of the interim executive board (IEB). In addition, inspectors spoke to two representatives of the local authority and sought the views of parents at the end of the school day. Inspectors gathered the views of pupils informally around the school and met with a group of pupils selected by the school. Inspectors visited lessons and scrutinised school documents, including those related to safeguarding, recruitment, behaviour, attendance and the checks made on the quality of teaching.

Context

The school continues to be led by the interim executive headteacher. The associate headteacher and the interim deputy headteacher roles continue to be filled by staff from Calthorpe School, the designated support school brokered by the local authority. Since the last monitoring inspection, two teachers and an admissions clerk have left the school. Four new teachers have been appointed, along with a learning mentor and a strategic business manager. As previously reported, a consultant headteacher has been contracted to work one day each week in the primary phase. In March 2015, the interim executive board engaged the services of an additional consultant headteacher to support staff in the primary phase. He works full time at the school. Support is provided in early years by two specialist leaders of education from Netherton Nursery School. One member of staff remains on long-term sick leave.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement in the secondary phase continues to remain stronger than that seen in primary. Information from the school's tracking system and evidence from students' books and folders show that, as reported previously, attainment at the end of Year 11 is expected to be above average. The proportion of students making or exceeding expected progress, including those eligible for pupil premium funding, are likely to compare favourably with the national averages.

Inspection evidence shows that the progress of children in the early years is improving. This is as a result of improvements in the quality of teaching and in the quality and choice of activities available to children. However, leaders acknowledge that there is still much work to be done to ensure that the provision maximises children's opportunity not only to practise their existing skills but also to learn new things and extend their thinking.

In Key Stage 1, most pupils are making the progress that is expected and some are making good progress. However, progress has not yet been accelerated sufficiently and, although the proportion of pupils on track to reach the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics will be in line with or above the national average, too few pupils are on track to achieve the higher Level 3, particularly in writing.

The recently introduced system to track pupils' progress is providing leaders and teachers with helpful information about how well individual pupils and groups of pupils are progressing. The data for Year 2 and Year 6 have been moderated to ensure accuracy. This information has enabled leaders to provide targeted support for pupils in Year 6 who were at risk of falling behind. As a result of this support, pupils' progress in this year group has accelerated, particularly in mathematics. The proportion of pupils on track to reach the expected levels in these subjects has improved since the last inspection. The improvement in writing has been less marked. Writing remains a key improvement area for the school.

The information about pupils' progress in Years 3, 4 and 5 has not been externally checked to ensure it reflects precisely the ability of the pupils. As a result, leaders have an overgenerous view of the progress being made by pupils in these year groups.

The progress made by disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs has improved since the last monitoring inspection but remains inconsistent between classes and subjects. Evidence from pupils' workbooks shows that this is particularly the case in the primary phase.

The quality of teaching

Some further improvements in the quality of teaching are evident; however, there is still work to be done to ensure that pupils make good progress consistently across the school. Teaching remains stronger in Key Stages 3 and 4 than in early years and the primary classes.

Further and faster improvement is needed in writing in the primary phase. The teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar has improved. However, some teachers lack the necessary depth of subject knowledge to ensure that pupils are taught to develop more sophisticated writing techniques and use a range of sentence types to engage the reader. In addition, pupils' workbooks in some primary and secondary classes show that they have too few opportunities to practise their writing skills in subjects other than English. Where these opportunities are provided, some teachers' expectations are too low and they do not check that pupils are applying the skills they learn in English to writing in other subjects.

In early years, the improvements in the learning environment and the provision of a broad range of activities for the children have been sustained. Adults are beginning

to become more skilled at asking children questions and prompting them during their activities to help to extend their thinking or to try out their ideas. However, adults are not yet skilled at ensuring that the learning in each activity is maximised because they do not scan the learning areas frequently enough to check what children are doing. In addition, as children are keen to experience the new outdoor learning environment, the activities indoors, which are often more focused on the development of reading, writing and calculating skills, are underutilised.

Teaching across the school is characterised by positive relationships between adults and pupils. Teachers are increasingly skilled at engaging and interesting the pupils. As a result, pupils are keen to learn and are attentive. In lessons, adults and pupils know what is to be learned and how this will be achieved. In Key Stage 4, there are frequent opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in a range of contexts. This is less evident in Key Stages 2 and 3. For example, in mathematics, pupils' workbooks show that Key Stage 2 pupils have too few opportunities to use what they know to solve problems or use reasoning and logic to solve puzzles. Pupils in Year 11 have been well prepared for their examinations. They were able to talk to inspectors about a range of strategies for tackling different question types.

In the primary phase, teachers have an increased awareness of the level at which their pupils are working. This is as a result of the new tracking system and the introduction of meetings with senior leaders about pupils' progress. This is helping teachers to better match work to pupils' abilities and individual learning needs. However, this remains inconsistent across subjects and classes.

Where teaching is most effective, teachers build on pupils' knowledge effectively over time and the pace of learning reflects the ability of the pupils. They check on pupils' progress throughout lessons and adapt the learning where necessary. Teachers use questions effectively to gauge the understanding of the pupils and quickly address any potential misconceptions before asking follow-up questions to deepen understanding. For example, in a Year 11 science class, the teacher ensured that the difference between velocity and momentum was precisely understood.

Where teaching is less effective, there are gaps in the subject knowledge of the teacher. In some subjects, this is being addressed by the use of subject specialists working alongside and coaching other staff; for example, in mathematics, drama and physical education. In some classes, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs have too few opportunities to work in a group with the teacher.

There is a consistent style of marking in place across the school. Positive features of learning are identified and an area for improvement is suggested. Where this practice works most effectively, the area for improvement is precise and clear, and improvement in future work is evident. While the practice of pupils marking one another's work is proving effective in some classes, in others it is less productive as

it has almost completely replaced the teachers' marking. This adversely affects the progress that pupils make.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

School records and discussions with pupils confirm that behaviour and attitudes to learning continue to improve. Pupils have helped staff to identify any 'hotspots' around the school, and staff duties have been adjusted to provide better supervision in these areas. In addition, older pupils have 'prefect' responsibilities to monitor behaviour; for example, on the stairs. Pupils told inspectors that these roles are seen as prestigious and are taken seriously. Leaders and pupils agree that behaviour around the school building continues to improve.

The pupils who spoke to inspectors report that bullying is not an issue that they are concerned about. Almost all of the parents who spoke to inspectors share this view. The records kept by the school confirm that there is little bullying.

In lessons, pupils are positive about their learning and behave well. Pupils told inspectors that disruptions to lessons are rare. However, adults in early years are not yet skilled in carefully monitoring all the activities that are now available to children. As a result, a number of children in the early years were observed to be overly boisterous during some lessons, running from one activity to another, unchecked by an adult. Older students who are currently sitting examinations demonstrate a focused approach to their revision.

Attendance remains broadly in line with the national average. Procedures for following up absences are appropriately rigorous. Where absence gives cause for concern, the attendance officer informs and involves the appropriate agencies; for example, the local authority.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The long-term future and stability of the most senior leadership of the school remains uncertain. Although there are plans to appoint a substantive headteacher, this is unlikely to happen until January 2016, more than two years after the school was placed in special measures. In addition, improvements in the primary phase of the school remain heavily reliant on the work of external consultants. These factors have had a considerable impact on the judgement made by inspectors that not enough progress has been made towards the removal of special measures.

Since the interim executive board and the current leadership, both interim and permanent, joined the school in June 2014 there has been an undeniable focus and drive to rapidly improve the school. Substantial improvements have been made. However, several of the complexities that surrounded this school when it went into a category of concern with regard to the relationship with the Al Hijrah Trust, finances,

staffing and difficulties related to the school site are still ongoing. This means that there is still much work to be done before the school is ready to be removed from special measures.

The interim executive board and the local authority have made regular contact with other agencies – for example, the Department for Education and the Charity Commission – to seek solutions to some of the challenges facing the school. Decisions and responses from these organisations have been slow and, as a result, issues such as the future of the school site, the rental agreement and the future governance of the school remain unresolved.

The local authority has successfully secured additional funding to offset some of the considerable costs of ensuring that the building was fit for purpose. However, the budget deficit for the school, although half what was originally forecast, remains substantial. This deficit was inherited by the interim executive board. The local authority forecasts that the school is unlikely to be able to run within its delegated budget until the financial year 2017/18.

The school leaders and consultants continue to work together effectively to improve the school. The interim executive headteacher provides clear direction and the associate headteacher and interim deputy headteacher have been instrumental in implementing systems and procedures that have led to measureable improvements. They have a broadly accurate view of the improvements that are yet to be made and acknowledge that there is still 'a lot to do'. The support from Calthorpe staff for the deputy and assistant headteachers has reduced as the capacity of these leaders to drive improvements has increased. This is not the case in the primary phase, where improvements are still reliant on the work of external consultants.

Since the last monitoring visit, a leader in charge of data and assessment has taken up post. He is working effectively with other senior leaders to refine the system of collecting and analysing information about pupils' progress. Teachers in the primary phase have access for the first time to data about how well individuals and groups of pupils are progressing. This is helping them to plan lessons more tailored to the abilities and individual learning needs of the pupils in their class. The checks made on the quality of teaching are frequent and focused. However, the written feedback provided to staff is not always clear and precise enough to enable teachers to make improvements to their practice. Information from the checks made on the quality of teaching is now combined with the information about pupils' progress. As a result, training for staff is tailored more precisely to their needs.

Three subject leaders have recently been appointed in the primary phase, for English, computing and mathematics. They have created suitable action plans for their areas of responsibility. They are being supported in their roles by senior leaders but it is too soon to see the impact of their work.

In the primary phase, pupils' workbooks show that an appropriately broad range of subjects are being taught. However, the quality of the work in subjects such as religious education and geography does not reflect a sufficient depth of learning. The computing curriculum is not yet fully in place. In addition, the quality of writing and the presentation of work in some subjects do not match that seen in pupils' English books.

Under the guidance of the Chair, the interim executive board has worked diligently to resolve many of the complex staffing and financial irregularities that they inherited. They have appointed a new strategic business manager to ensure that processes and procedures for financial matters are improved and are robust. They have increased the capacity of administrative support to ensure that the checks made on staff are thorough and are recorded accurately. Their work has been thorough and effective; it has ensured that leaders can continue to focus on improving the quality of teaching in the school. However, their capacity to focus sufficiently on holding the school to account for the improvements being made to the quality of teaching and the progress of pupils is limited by the extent of the issues they are dealing with and the small number of members. It is important that this is resolved as a matter of urgency as the interim executive board has a crucial role to play in ensuring that there is continuity of governance until the issues surrounding the Trust have been resolved.

External support

The local authority continues to provide effective legal, financial and human resource support for the school. The assigned adviser is proactive in providing advice, particularly in the primary phase, and in securing support from a range of sources. However, there is not an appropriate system in place for the local authority to check on the work of the senior leaders and hold them to account for their impact on the quality of teaching and improvements in pupils' progress.

The staff members from Calthorpe continue to provide appropriate and effective support. In some aspects, their support is being reduced as the capacity of Al Hijrah senior leaders is increasing.

The two consultant headteachers are providing effective support which is leading to some improvements in the primary phase.