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Mark Garside
Headteacher
The International School
Gressel Lane
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Birmingham
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Dear Mr Garside

Special measures monitoring inspection of The International School

Following my visit with Louise Mallett, Additional Inspector, to your school on 23–24 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 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 school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Chris Chapman

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
- The lead and team inspectors.

Annex

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

- Improve leadership and management at all levels so that the achievement of students rapidly improves to good and better, through:
 - rigorous monitoring of teaching which tackles weaknesses effectively through robust performance management procedures
 - ensuring that governors hold senior leaders to account for implementing an effective action plan which is monitored regularly, and which provides them with accurate and timely information on the performance of all staff and groups of students
 - middle leaders effectively monitoring the performance of teachers and other staff in their areas of responsibility and holding them to account for students' progress.

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that teachers:
 - communicate high expectations of all students, and provide work which engages and challenges them and promotes at least good progress from their different starting points
 - plan work to ensure students' literacy and numeracy skills improve rapidly from their starting points on entering the school and are practised well through being applied effectively in all subjects
 - provide feedback in marking that accurately assesses the standards of students' work and indicates clearly to students what to do to make improvements
 - help students to correct mistakes in their writing, so that students spell accurately, write in complete sentences, and use capital letters and full stops appropriately
 - insist all students complete their work, write legibly and take care with its presentation
 - deploy teaching assistants effectively so that they prompt students to think more deeply about their learning and improve the standard of their work.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 23–24 June 2015

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and middle leaders. Inspectors also met with two members of the interim executive board and two members of the local authority 'monitoring task force'. Further meetings were held with the headteacher of Wheeler's Lane Technology College and the Principal Associate of Bishop Challoner Catholic College, who is also Chair of the Bishop Challoner Teaching School, which is providing support for the school. Inspectors spoke to students during break times, lunchtimes and in classrooms, and met formally with groups of students. Inspectors visited lessons and scrutinised school documents, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour, attendance, checks made on the quality of teaching and records of students' achievement.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the headteacher has announced his retirement and will leave post at the end of the academic year. A new headteacher, who is currently the deputy headteacher of an outstanding school, has been seconded from September 2015 for a period of 12 months. Two deputy headteachers joined the school in April in temporary positions. One of these will leave at the end of this academic year; the other will stay on, initially for the first term of next academic year. An assistant headteacher who currently has responsibility for safeguarding and student welfare leaves at the end of this academic year. Two assistant headteachers will take up post in September, one who has responsibility for students' standards in Year 9 and Year 10, and another who will have shared responsibility for teaching and learning. The school is currently advertising for two substantive deputy headteachers to take up post in January 2016. The roles and responsibilities of the leadership team have been restructured.

Four teachers have joined the staff since my last visit, three of whom are permanent appointments. At the end of the current academic year, nine teachers and four members of support staff will leave the school. Three new members of teaching staff will take up post from September.

An interim executive board replaced the governing body in April 2015.

Achievement of students at the school

Teachers' predictions for examination results for the current Year 11 show that achievement is expected to be below floor standards again. Therefore outcomes will remain inadequate.

The school's records show some emergent signs of improvement. This is particularly evident in the predicted performance of Year 11 students in English, in which overall measures of students' progress are expected to meet, if not exceed, that of other schools nationally. Although better than in the past, students will continue to make significantly less progress than they should in mathematics by the end of Year 11. The progress made by disadvantaged students in mathematics is a considerable concern and is worse than last year. The gaps between the progress made by disadvantaged students and their peers in school and nationally are expected to widen. Wide gaps are further reflected in the proportion of disadvantaged students who secure five or more A* to C grades as compared to their peers in school. Across other subjects, improvements are evident, but often incremental. Low attainment is expected to persist in history, geography, technology, art, languages and in core science.

There are some worrying inconsistencies between the achievement of different groups of students. At both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, the progress made by White British students, and, in some year groups, Pakistani students, is a concern. Disabled students and those who have special educational needs do not make enough progress in mathematics or science. The wide gaps between disadvantaged students and their classmates that are seen by the end of Key Stage 4 in mathematics are also present in Year 8 and Year 9.

Poor teaching over time, as a result of a lack of permanent teachers, has had a detrimental impact on the progress made by Year 9 students. These students need to make rapid progress if they are to catch up against this legacy of underachievement. Across Key Stage 3, weaknesses in the achievement of students in science, history, technology and art are evident. Strategies to improve students' reading skills are having insufficient impact on raising students' reading ages. This is a barrier to students' achievement across the curriculum.

Students' achievement in lessons is variable and too often inadequate. Teachers do not insist on high enough standards in students' work or have high enough expectations of what students are capable of achieving. However, inspectors found that, in some subjects – for example, in history – recently appointed teachers were having a positive impact, with better teaching helping students to make quicker progress than they have done in the past.

The monitoring of students' progress is improving and is more systematic. Leaders are also implementing new systems of target setting to raise expectations. External checks of the accuracy of teachers' assessments in English and mathematics have offered leaders greater confidence in the accuracy of the information they are provided with. There are plans to ensure that rigorous, on-going quality assurance processes secure robust assessment information across all subjects. However, currently, until examination results are published in the summer, leaders cannot fully trust in the accuracy of the records they have about students' achievement in all subject areas.

The quality of teaching

Both the school's internal records and the outcomes of external reviews of the quality of teaching show that too little teaching is of a good enough standard to raise students' achievement rapidly. Targeted support from leaders has brought about a reduction in the proportion of teaching that is inadequate, and a more stable teaching workforce is placing the school in far better position to drive forward further improvements than has been possible in the past.

Teachers now share 'learning intentions' with their students so that students have a better understanding of how to achieve well in lessons. These are grouped into 'walk it', 'drive it', 'fly it' to present students with different degrees of challenge. This practice is helping teachers become more aware of the need to offer students greater challenge in their lessons. When used well, 'learning intentions' are shared and explained carefully to set a clear direction for students' learning and to motivate them. At times, teachers simply specify what tasks students need to complete during the lesson, so that students are not clear enough on what they are learning, or the language used is too vague or complex to be helpful to students.

There are pockets of effective practice in which teachers use the information they have about their students to adapt work to cater for their different abilities or meet their specific learning needs. For example, in a Year 10 science lesson, the teacher carefully considered both the abilities and reading ages of students in the class to set students different tasks to complete. As a result, students were appropriately challenged and successfully developed their understanding of genetic diseases. However, this is not common practice. Most teachers lack the skills to match work well to their students' capabilities. Consequently, the most able are not challenged sufficiently to make the progress that they should, and the less able, and students who speak English as an additional language, cannot understand their work well enough to succeed.

Some training has taken place to improve teachers' questioning skills. The quality of questioning remains variable. Where questioning is used well, teachers ask questions that engage students, probe their understanding and challenge them. In a Year 10 mathematics lesson, the teacher's skilful questioning both challenged the most able and got students to explain the approaches they had taken to solving problems on 'scale factors'. This enabled misconceptions to be made explicit and to be corrected so that students' understanding was improved. In some lessons, teachers do not ask questions to check students' learning, so that they cannot be sure that all students are learning as well as they should be. On other occasions, questions are too superficial to get students to think more deeply about their learning, and progress is limited as a result.

Application of the school's marking policy is inconsistent. Teachers use a marking stamp to structure their written feedback to students, stating the strengths of

students' work and what needs to be done to improve. Some but not all teachers have an expectation that students respond to this guidance in order to show that they have acted on the advice given. Often the guidance offered by teachers does not have an impact on students' learning because it is not linked to the skills students need to make progress in the subject. When students respond to their teachers' targets, they sometimes simply regurgitate the teachers' comments and fail to actually use the opportunity to make improvements to their work.

The presentation of students' work remains poor. Although leaders have issued guidance on how students should present their work, this is not followed and teachers' expectations are too low. Badly presented work, and untidy handwriting, particularly from boys, is accepted and not challenged. A small number of books seen had graffiti in them. At times, teachers do not model how to write neatly.

There is a raised awareness of the need to develop students' literacy skills across subjects. Teachers are increasingly identifying spelling and grammatical errors when they mark students' work. Inspectors also saw examples of teachers sharing with students key words needed in lessons in order to build students' vocabulary. In lessons outside of English, such as in the humanities subjects, teachers also make students aware of the style and purpose of writing that they need to produce. However, writing is not modelled effectively by teachers to set clear expectations of what good writing looks like so that students understand how to write well. 'Literacy mats' are used in lessons, but sometimes these are too complex to be helpful to students in supporting their writing.

Behaviour and safety of students

Strong relationships between teachers and students, typified by teachers' praise and encouragement, nurture good attitudes to learning in some lessons. In physical education lessons, inspectors saw how students engaged enthusiastically with their learning. Students supported and helped each other, providing constructive feedback to their peers so that they improved their athletics skills. In many lessons, students listen attentively, follow their teachers' instructions and get on well with their work, but this enthusiasm is less evident.

When the pace of learning is slow, or the work set does not stimulate students' interests or is not challenging enough, low-level disruption occurs. If teachers challenge this, students generally respond well and re-engage with their work. Some teachers are not vigilant enough in identifying when students stray off task. Slow progress is therefore unchecked and allowed to continue for too long.

During informal times of the day, such as during break time, lunchtime and when moving between lessons, students are lively, but conduct themselves in a safe and generally sensible manner. High levels of staff supervision support students' positive behaviour. Students can be slow to get back to their lessons after lunch.

Students who spoke to inspectors told them that behaviour at the school is generally good. They value their teachers, who they say are supportive and approachable. However, when students have temporary teachers, behaviour is worse because the work they are set lacks continuity with their programmes of study. Students value the cultural diversity of the school community and feel that they get on well and benefit from learning from the experiences of students from other backgrounds. Students feel safe in the school and report that bullying is infrequent. They are comfortable reporting any problems to members of staff and have confidence that any issues they report will be resolved. Online systems provide students with further channels to inform the school of any incidents of bullying in the event that it did occur. Students support services was cited as an accessible resource for students to discuss any problems or concerns they had.

Systems for improving students' behaviour over time are not good enough. The current behaviour policy lacks the clarity needed to bring about consistent standards in all classrooms. Leaders are aware of this and will be introducing a new policy early in the next academic year. Fixed-term exclusions have increased since the last academic year and are considerably above the national average. Although leaders use a range of strategies to tackle challenging behaviour, they do not evaluate the impact of their work well enough so that they are able to identify what works well. This limits leaders' abilities to bring about improvements. This is also the case with strategies to improve attendance, which have not been effective enough. Although the school works with the local authority to improve the attendance of those students who are regularly absent from school, there is a lack of robust intervention that takes place prior to this. Consequently, overall attendance is below that of other schools nationally, and too many students are regularly absent from school, particularly disadvantaged students.

Effective relationships with a range of agencies enable leaders to take suitable action to keep students safe from harm. However, some aspects of policy and procedures need to be sharpened. An administrative error in the single central record was rectified during the inspection. Although records show that safer recruitment training has been undertaken by a number of members of staff, records of appointments do not clearly document whether an appropriately trained person took part in the interview process. The school currently operates both a safeguarding policy and a child protection policy. These need to be consolidated into a single, coherent document in order that staff are issued with clear, exacting guidance. Neither of these policies makes explicit reference to the latest statutory guidance or to the risks that students may face from forced marriage, female genital mutilation or radicalisation and extremism. All staff at the school must be vigilant to these risks, and the policy should support this awareness.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The commissioned headteacher has provided highly effective support for school leaders and has been at the forefront of developments to drive the school forward. This is informed by a thorough and realistic understanding of the weaknesses of the school and what needs to be done to improve it. Considerable work has been undertaken to put in place a secure and effective leadership team, a curriculum that will better promote students' achievement and personal development, and a permanent staffing structure. As a result, the school is now far better positioned to be able to bring about sustainable improvements. Additions to the leadership team have added some much-needed strength. A restructure of roles has offered leaders greater clarity of purpose and enables them to be held to account for realising improvements in their areas of responsibility.

In my previous visit, severe staffing problems were identified as a significant obstacle to school improvement. There has been a considerable reduction in the proportion of temporary, short-term teachers in the school currently, and this will be further reduced from September. A plan is now in place to secure the financial stability of the school. There are some emerging signs of the impact of leaders' work. Leaders have reduced, though not yet eradicated, inadequate teaching. There are some improvements in aspects of student' achievement. However, the enormity of the task that leaders have faced to stabilise the school has meant that this impact is not yet sufficiently evident in the quality of teaching or in students' achievement, attendance and rates of exclusions. In my next visit, I will be expecting leaders to demonstrate rapid improvements in all of these areas.

The work of middle leaders is still too variable. These leaders have a clearer sense of direction. Work with Specialist Leaders of Education from other schools has been welcomed and is beginning to develop the skills of subject leaders. In some subjects, such as in English and mathematics, a more permanent workforce means that these leaders are now in a stronger position to affect positive change. Although subject leaders are starting to undertake monitoring and evaluation activities, this work remains in its emergent phases and is not systematic. As a result, middle leaders lack a full understanding of the performance of their teams and are not able to identify and tackle areas of weakness effectively. Leaders with responsibility for those disabled students and those who have special educational needs and students who speak English as an additional language do not currently have a role in monitoring the quality of teaching. This limits the understanding these leaders have of provision across the curriculum for the students for whom they are responsible, and inhibits their ability to have an impact on teachers' practice.

Improvements in the quality of teaching, though evident, are too slow. These have been hindered by a lack of coordination and sharing of information across the leaders who are responsible for teaching and learning. These roles will be restructured from September to address these issues. Monitoring activities are

undertaken but are not yet frequent or systematic enough; nor is the information gathered used well enough to bring about change at the pace that is needed. Staff training and programmes to support the work of individual teachers are beginning to have an impact. These programmes have not, however, been successful in securing enough good teaching. Systems to manage the performance of teachers have been overhauled by the commissioned headteacher. Robust procedures are expected to be in place from September.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium funding was undertaken in May. This review identifies wide-ranging failings in the deployment, monitoring and evaluation of this funding that has led to ineffective and inefficient spending. The review has issued leaders with a strong and clear action plan that will support the school in delivering necessary improvements. A new leadership role has now been created to oversee the implementation of this plan and secure better accountability for the impact of this funding.

An interim executive board has been in place since April, replacing what was, at my last visit, a depleted and ineffectual governing body. This group consists of highly experienced headteachers and governors. They have the necessary skills to lead the strategic direction of the school and provide effective levels of challenge and support to leaders that has been lacking in the past. In a short space of time, the interim executive board has established, from clear information offered by the commissioned headteacher and other parties involved in the school improvement process, a thorough understanding of the challenges facing the school. The expertise of this group has been instrumental in shaping plans to secure the financial stability of the school.

External support

The commissioned headteacher has played a critical role in arresting the decline in standards in the school. High-quality and wide-ranging external support from the Bishop Challoner Teaching School Alliance is benefiting leaders at all levels. These support structures are now planned to continue for a further two years in order that the school builds and secures the capacity for sustained improvement.

Through the 'monitoring task force', the local authority provides robust accountability and challenge to school leaders to ensure that progress is made against the school action plan. Two external reviews of the quality of teaching have been undertaken that have quality assured the work of school leaders and provided robust and informative evaluations of this crucial aspect of the school's work.