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Ms Jane Aplin
Principal
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Dear Ms Aplin

Special measures monitoring inspection of The West Somerset College

Following my visit with Stephen Lee, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Howard Dodd, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy on 3 and 4 November 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, your staff, governors and pupils 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 October 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence, I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

This letter and the 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 Regional Schools Commissioner, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Somerset and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Quickly eradicate all inadequate teaching and increase the amount of good teaching by ensuring that teachers:
 - raise their expectations of what students are able to achieve
 - use information on students' achievement and individual needs to plan learning activities that enable them to make good progress
 - provide students with consistently high-quality feedback and marking that informs them of how well they have done and the next steps they need to take to improve their learning
 - make sure that students act upon feedback and marking so that they can demonstrate that they know how to improve their learning
 - work alongside the most effective teachers in the school to learn from their practice.
- Raise achievement across the college, particularly in English, mathematics and the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - the most able students are suitably challenged
 - students' individual needs are well known, particularly those who may be disabled, have special educational needs or are eligible for pupil premium funding, to provide them with highly effective support
 - the transition process from Year 8 into Year 9 is strengthened, particularly around understanding students' levels of achievement, so that they are able to commence learning immediately and not waste valuable learning time
 - extra support sessions are rigorously monitored to make sure that students are making faster progress than they would without the extra support
 - high-quality GCSE English and mathematics teaching is provided in the sixth form so that those who do not have a good grade in these subjects are able to achieve one.
- Eradicate the poor behaviour which impedes students' learning.
- Raise students' attendance levels to be at least in line with the national average.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - training senior and middle leaders to monitor and evaluate robustly the impact of initiatives that they have implemented
 - ensuring that teachers understand and make good use of information on students' individual educational, social and emotional needs
 - specifying how and when leaders will check the progress made towards meeting important targets
 - fully implementing the statutory sixth form study programmes

- ensuring that governors hold leaders to account for the performance of the college.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the college's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 November 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting principal; the executive headteacher; other senior leaders; the senior staff from Bridgwater College Academy supporting the college; subject leaders for English, mathematics and science, and the leader for creative arts subjects; two groups of pupils; and three members of the governing body, including the chair and vice-chair.

An open meeting was held with members of the teaching and non-teaching staff. The lead inspector had many informal discussions with pupils and staff around the college.

Inspectors visited 48 lessons, most jointly with college senior leaders and/or subject leaders. In lessons, they looked at pupils' work and talked to them about it.

Context

It was recently confirmed that the college will become part of the Bridgwater College Trust, a multi-academy trust, from 1 January 2016. This process has taken longer than expected. The college's status will change from a converter academy to a sponsored academy. Following this change, there will be a new governing body.

The college is already supported by the executive headteacher and other senior staff from the Bridgwater College Academy. The college principal resigned at the end of April 2015 and an acting principal from Bridgwater College Academy led the college during the summer term. The college has also been supported by the Taunton Teaching Alliance.

The current acting principal took up post at the start of this college year. The senior leadership team has been restructured to refine and clarify leadership responsibilities. There were also some changes to the teaching staff for this year.

The college day has been changed so that there are four significantly longer lessons and a much shorter lunch break. Pupils start the day with the first lesson; they are registered in each lesson and at the end of the school day. Sixth form pupils are expected to register every morning and afternoon and remain in the college throughout the day.

College leaders have made significant changes to the curriculum throughout the college, including in the sixth form. This is to ensure that courses meet the needs of pupils and are viable.

Outcomes for pupils

GCSE results improved in 2015. The proportion of pupils who achieved five good GCSEs including English and mathematics rose from 36% in 2014 to 49% in 2015. The proportions making at least the expected progress in English and mathematics also rose. The achievement of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs improved significantly. However, much of this improvement was achieved through extensive and intensive support in the weeks leading up to the examinations rather than through sustained improvements in the quality of teaching. Too much teaching is still not good enough.

Despite these overall improvements, boys' achievement in English is far too low. The gap in achievement in mathematics between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and others has narrowed when compared with national figures, but the gap in the college has not closed. Achievement in science and modern foreign languages is too low. There are significant variations in achievement across a range of other subjects.

At the time of this visit, the college leaders had not yet analysed the outcomes of the first assessment point in the year as information was still being entered into the system. While the overall impression is that achievement continues to improve, there was no analysis to determine this in detail. College leaders are fully aware of the need to improve the achievement of particular groups of pupils and in some subjects, and the changes they have introduced are beginning to make a difference.

The progress pupils make in lessons is widely variable and not good enough in too many. There are signs of better progress in some lessons and in some subjects. However, teachers' expectations of pupils are often too low and teaching is not matched well to pupils' current levels of achievement. Pupils are unclear about what is expected of them. All pupils work at the same, often too slow, pace in too many lessons. In many lessons, the most able in the class are set work that is too easy. Those who are finding the work difficult do not always receive the support they need to make better progress. Pupils in too many lessons do not receive the feedback they need to deepen their learning or overcome the difficulties they have.

The improvements in A-level results in 2015 are undermined by poor rates of retention. Too few pupils continue from Year 12 to Year 13. Too many pupils did not do well enough in examinations at the end of Year 12 to continue to A-level courses. There was too much variation in the outcomes for pupils with similar starting points. Too many pupils were on courses that were not suitable. The majority of current Year 12 pupils are on courses much better suited to their prior achievement and aspirations for the future. However, the proportion of the 2015 Year 11 pupils who returned to the college sixth form was significantly lower than in previous years. The college estimates that up to 70 potential A-level pupils decided to leave the college at the end of Year 11 and pursue post-16 courses elsewhere. This has reduced the breadth of post-16 courses that the college can provide.

The expectations of pupils are too low in many sixth form lessons and pupils do not make enough progress. Teachers do not make best use of the teaching time available. Pupils are set tests or independent learning tasks that could have been completed as preparation for the lesson. Pupils are not encouraged to make best use of their independent study time to prepare for lessons and complete the tasks set. The skills to make best use of this time are not developed well before they enter the sixth form. Sixth form lessons do not develop pupils' skills in reading, writing, speaking and mathematics or their wider employability skills well enough.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Overall, the quality of teaching has improved, but too much in all year groups, including in the sixth form, is still not good enough. As a result, too many pupils do not make as much progress as they should in too many lessons. It is often unclear what the expected learning outcomes from the lesson are. The longer lessons, following the changes to the college day, are not used well to develop depth in learning, rather than 'more of the same'.

Teachers have access to diagnostic assessment information from tests and other sources, but they do not match their teaching well enough to pupils' current levels of achievement. Many do not have a clear understanding of what pupils can and cannot do, and what they do and do not know and understand. This means that too many pupils, including the most able and those at risk of falling behind, do not make enough progress. In a Year 10 mathematics lesson, two able pupils completed the set work very quickly. They said that this was always the case and they found the work far too easy. They filled their time chatting and doodling. In the same class, through the marking of his work, a boy was repeatedly told to do more work. He said that he found it too difficult and received little help from the teacher.

The quality of teachers' marking of pupils' work is widely inconsistent and far too much is not good enough. Too many pupils are not provided with clear and precise feedback on their work. As a result, they are often unclear about how to improve it. The really good examples of how this can be done well, as seen for example in a Year 11 physics lesson and in a Year 11 English lesson, are too few. Senior leaders are working hard to share this good practice but, at this stage, this has had little impact.

Teachers do not use questioning well enough to probe and deepen pupils' learning, including in sixth form lessons. Questions are insufficiently challenging. Pupils' responses are not shared with others to invite them to further develop the answer, contribute their own views or challenge others' ideas. Too many pupils realise that if they do not volunteer answers they can opt out of the discussion. Boys in some English lessons take this approach, which partly explains why they perform much less well than girls.

The college has to use non-specialist teachers to teach some A-level subjects. These teachers sometimes do not have the depth of subject knowledge required to challenge pupils to achieve as well as they should.

Encouragingly, there is some outstanding teaching in the college: for example, in art, photography and textiles. There is some good teaching in a number of other subjects, including in English, history, science and in some vocational subjects. Pupils on post-16 vocational programmes in the Skills and Enterprise Centre are very well prepared for their next steps in education, training or employment. This range of good practice enables college leaders to exemplify what good and outstanding teaching looks like for those teachers who need support to improve. However, the impact of this is not yet fully evident.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils and teachers were keen to let inspectors know about improvements in pupils' behaviour.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons has improved, although they often show passive compliance rather than enthusiasm for their learning. This is a response to teaching that is not matched well to pupils' current levels of achievement. When teaching is better, pupils respond and involve themselves in lessons well. Pupils report that they feel that some teachers are not using the extended time in lessons well to maintain a good pace of learning. This view was supported by inspectors' own observations.

Pupils' behaviour around the college has also improved. The atmosphere around the college at the start of the day, at break and lunch times, lesson changeover and at the end of the day is calm, orderly and safe. Pupils move promptly to lessons and mostly arrive ready to start to learn.

The college's leaders fully recognise that to sustain, and build on, these improvements in pupils' behaviour to improve their attitudes to learning, teaching needs to be better.

Pupils' attendance overall and for all groups has also improved, dramatically in the sixth form. College leaders have introduced strategies that will have a long-term and sustainable impact on continued improvements in attendance and reducing persistent absence. For example, they have worked with health centres and GP surgeries, and with parents, to reduce medical appointments during the college day and to develop a greater understanding of when pupils are ill enough to stay away from college and when they are not. They are working with parents to reduce the number of holidays taken in term-time. The approach in the sixth form, including registration at the start of the day, has had a clear and positive impact. Senior

leaders also understand that attendance is likely to improve further as teaching improves.

Inspectors found no safeguarding or safety issues during the visit. Training for staff on safeguarding and child protection is well led and dedicated time is allocated each year to update this. The college is well on track to fully implement its responsibilities within its 'Prevent' duties to tackle extremist views and ideas. This is well led and training for all staff is planned. The college is currently planning how to ensure that all pupils have a deep understanding of issues related to extremism and radicalisation.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The college's current senior leaders have a clear understanding of what needs to improve and where there is good practice that can be built on. Sixth form leaders understand what they need to do to improve the sixth form. The acting principal, supported well by the executive headteacher and other senior staff, provides the college with a clear sense of direction. Senior leaders fully understand that progress in improving the college has not been rapid enough and they are in no doubt about what is now required to secure the rapid improvements needed. Actions have already been taken that provide a secure foundation for further improvements, but have not yet had sufficient impact.

Teachers have been, and continue to be, provided with extensive professional development and support. However, at this stage, not all teachers fully understand what they need to do to improve their teaching to the quality expected. It is essential that this is established as a matter of urgency.

There are clear indications that many aspects of the college are beginning to improve.

- Pupils and teachers are much more positive. Year 9 pupils, who have been in the college since September, are pleased with their experiences so far, and those in Year 10 and in the sixth form believe the college has improved.
- While there were no additional responses to the Ofsted online survey (Parent View), the college reports a much more positive attitude towards the college among parents and the wider community.
- There are marked improvements in pupils' behaviour, punctuality and attendance. Senior leaders are fully aware of the need to improve pupils' attitudes to learning by improving the quality of teaching.
- Communications between staff and senior leaders are much improved and there is an atmosphere that is supportive rather than overly critical. Staff feel much more confident about asking for help and receiving the support they need. Many told inspectors that the 'fear of failure' has been largely removed.

- Lines of accountability for improving the quality of teaching and learning are much clearer and more effective. Subject leadership is much clearer. The arrangements in English, mathematics and science are improving the quality of provision in these subjects and building on existing good practice.
- The leadership of the provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs has improved so that they are better catered for and their achievement has improved.
- There has been a dramatic reduction in the number of lessons not taught by the timetabled subject teacher. This is providing much more stability for pupils.
- Both sixth form leaders had only just taken up post at the time of the previous monitoring visit. The actions they are taking are starting to make a difference and provide secure foundations to tackle the weaknesses in teaching in the sixth form.
- Good progress has been made to ensure that all sixth form pupils will have suitable and sufficient work experience and other enrichment opportunities.

Extensive monitoring of the quality of teaching and pupils' progress is undertaken through observations of lessons by senior and subject leaders. However, the observations are not focused sharply enough on the key aspects of teaching that need to be improved. There is insufficient precise and evaluative analysis of the outcomes of this monitoring to pinpoint exactly:

- the impact of the professional development provided for teachers
- the effectiveness of any actions to improve particular aspects of teaching or to raise the achievement of specific groups of pupils
- the effectiveness of the actions taken by subject leaders to improve the quality of teaching
- the effectiveness of senior leaders' management of subject leaders.

Governors explained, backed up by minutes of recent meetings, that they have been asking for this analysis for some time to enable them to better hold senior leaders to account. They have not been provided with this analysis.

By the time of the next visit, the college should ensure that:

- all teachers fully understand what they need to do to improve their teaching to the quality required so that pupils make the progress they are capable of
- there is greater clarity about the learning that is expected with teachers making better use of the increased time in lessons to achieve greater depth in learning
- teachers in the sixth form make better use of the teaching time available in lessons

- teachers monitor learning more effectively and use their understanding of pupils' current levels of achievement to make sure that pupils make better progress, including the most able, those at risk of falling behind, disadvantaged pupils, those with disabilities and those who have special educational needs
- all teachers provide pupils with precise feedback on their work that helps them to make further progress and/or overcome any difficulties they have
- sixth form leaders have convincing explanations for the differences in achievement of pupils with similar starting points and are actively addressing these
- a detailed and precise analysis of the evaluations of teaching and learning arising from lesson observations undertaken by senior and subject leaders leads to greater clarity about what is effective and what is not
- governors are provided with this analysis to enable them to robustly hold senior leaders to account for improving the quality of teaching and raising pupils' achievement.

External support

The improvements that have been secured have been strongly influenced by the support the college has received from key senior leaders from the Bridgwater College Academy and through the Taunton Teaching Alliance. The college is also seeking help to improve the sixth form. The links with Bridgwater College Academy are being used to plan how to broaden and enhance post-16 provision.