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Mrs Herminder Channa
Principal
Ark Boulton Academy
Golden Hillock Road
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Birmingham
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Dear Mrs Channa

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ark Boulton Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 15 and 16 December 2015 with David Hughes, Ofsted Inspector, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 2015.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The academy is taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The sponsor's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The academy's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint four newly qualified teachers (NQTs), two each to the English and mathematics departments.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham and the Department for Education Academies Advisers Unit. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2015

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement, especially in Key Stage 3, by
 - improving the quality of teaching, reducing the number of supply teachers and level of teacher turnover
 - improving teachers' assessment to focus on what students know, can do and understand already and set students appropriately challenging targets
 - use test and assessment data more effectively to identify specific groups that need further support or challenge.

- Improve the experience of students in Year 7 by ensuring that teachers understand and appreciate the improved skill levels and increased knowledge of students transferring in from the local primary schools, and that they expect more of these students.

- Monitor more rigorously the impact of the additional, specialist funding for disabled students and those who have special educational needs.

- Improve behaviour further by ensuring that all staff use the behaviour management system appropriately.

- Ensure that the academy has a secure and sustainable leadership team.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 15-16 December 2015

Evidence

During this inspection, inspectors observed pupils' learning in a range of subjects across the academy. During these observations, inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke to them about their learning. Inspectors also spoke informally to pupils about behaviour, attendance and how they learn to keep themselves safe. The behaviour of pupils was observed as they arrived at the academy, at break and lunchtimes, as they left the academy premises at the end of the day and in lessons. Meetings were held with the Principal, Executive Principal, academy leaders and Ark Network Leaders (Ark Schools' consultants for teaching and leadership and management). A telephone conversation was held with the Chair of the Governing Body. The views of parents were noted from the 23 responses to the academy's own questionnaire to parents completed since the previous inspection. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's own online questionnaire, Parent View, for these to be considered. The views of staff were considered from the 35 responses to the staff questionnaire. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the academy's analysis of pupils' current attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance. Additional documentation was analysed, for example, information about the quality of learning, teaching and assessment, minutes of governors' meetings, the academy's procedures to ensure pupils are kept safe and secure and the checks on the suitability of staff to work with children. The sponsor's statement of action and the academy's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the previous inspection, Ark Schools has taken over the running of the academy. The academy name has changed from 'Golden Hillock School – A CORE Trust Academy' to 'Ark Boulton Academy'. There has been a substantial turnover of staff. A significant number of teachers and leaders are suspended, on long-term sick leave or having their performance closely monitored. Seventeen teachers started at the academy in September 2015. A further seven teachers have been recruited since the start of the autumn term. Four new teachers will be joining the academy in January 2016, including a subject leader for English. Pupils returned to the academy on 14 September 2015.

Outcomes for pupils

The new sponsor inherited an academy with a history of underachievement. For example, the overall results in 2015 were low and disabled pupils and those with special educational needs underachieved. Training for teachers on how to meet the needs of pupils is being provided. However, it is too early to see what impact this training is having on pupils' progress.

Ark academy leaders say that the information collected by the previous academy was inaccurate. As a result, at the start of the autumn term all of the pupils took part in standardised tests to measure their abilities, aptitudes and current knowledge and understanding. This information provides academy leaders and teachers with an accurate picture of pupils' starting points. The information is being used to hold teachers and pupils to account for the progress they make. However, pupils' progress varies considerably across the academy and within subjects, due, primarily, to the inconsistent quality of teaching and checks on pupils' understanding. Pupils' rate of progress depends very much on the teachers that they have. As a result, there is no set pattern of underachievement across year groups or subjects. Nevertheless, it can be seen in Key Stage 3 that girls are consistently outperforming boys in English, mathematics and science. The work seen in the majority of pupils' books shows that standards are improving but are still below where they should be. Information provided by the academy shows that pupils' progress in the second half of the autumn term is better than that in the first half term. However, the rate of progress that the majority of pupils are currently making is too slow. This is particularly the case for the most-able pupils.

Literacy levels are too low across the academy. For example, 57% of pupils in Year 7 have a reading age that is below their actual age. Academy leaders recognise this and have put in place interventions to develop pupils' literacy skills. A commercial phonics (letters and the sounds they make) scheme has been introduced to teach reading systematically. As yet, it is too early to see the impact of this work. In addition, teachers in subjects other than English do not routinely do enough to support the development of pupils' literacy skills, especially for those pupils who are in danger of underachieving.

The use of the pupil premium funding made little difference to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in 2015. The progress for disadvantaged pupils was well below that of other pupils nationally. The evaluation of this spending lacks rigour and academy leaders, including governors, do not have a clear picture of the effect the spending is having on disadvantaged pupils' progress.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Pupils told inspectors that the number of supply teachers has been reduced. As a result, there has been a significant improvement in the quality of teaching in most subjects. The work in pupils' books shows that teaching is improving, but that the quality still remains too variable.

Academy leaders make sure that teachers now have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. Pupils' individual targets are higher and the majority understand what is expected of them. Teachers consistently apply the academy's behaviour policy. As a consequence, the atmosphere in the majority of classes is generally calm and purposeful. However, the work that pupils are set is often not hard enough,

despite teachers having higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. As a result, pupils, especially the most-able, are not making fast enough progress. In addition, while teachers can identify pupils with learning difficulties, they are not always able to set work at the right level of difficulty to enhance progress.

Teachers' written comments and how they talk to pupils to help them improve their work is variable. Pupils' books are marked but the comments do not always help pupils to better understand or improve their work. In class, teachers do not routinely check on pupils' understanding. As a result, pupils' misunderstanding and misconceptions are not always challenged or corrected.

The inconsistency in the quality of teaching remains a concern for academy leaders and governors. Ark Network Leaders are supporting teachers in improving their practice. However, it is too early to see a significant and sustained impact from this support.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Most of the pupils and staff say that behaviour has improved since September. Most teachers consistently use the academy's behaviour policy. As a result, pupils are aware of what is expected of them in and out of class. Pupils are generally friendly, polite and well mannered. They are proud of their work and are willing to share their achievements and successes with visitors. The relationships between pupils and teachers and amongst pupils are positive. Pupils conduct themselves well and the vast majority have embraced the recent changes to the academy's behaviour policy and practice. Pupils wear their new uniform with pride and follow new routines sensibly. However, a minority of pupils present challenging behaviour. When teaching fails to engage or interest these pupils their behaviour deteriorates and they disrupt the learning of others. When the level of challenge and the pace of learning are inappropriate, pupils' concentration can wander and the quality of their work declines.

The number of times that pupils were excluded for a short period because of poor behaviour increased in the second half of the autumn term. However, an analysis of these figures shows that exclusion was used as a last resort and for justifiable reasons such as fighting or rudeness to staff.

Attendance is below the national average, particularly for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. However, leaders are aware of this and are using a range of strategies and outside agencies to support vulnerable pupils and their families.

The large majority of pupils who spoke to inspectors said that they enjoy coming to the academy, feel safe and appreciate the work being done by the 'new' academy leaders. Pupils said that incidents of bullying are rare and that incidents are dealt

with quickly and effectively. Academy leaders routinely involve parents when their child fails to meet the academy's expectations. This ensures effective home-academy links and reinforces the academy's aim to work in partnership with families.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy sponsor and leaders have had too little time, since it took over the running of the academy in September, to demonstrate a significant and sustained impact on pupils' progress. However, the fresh start has clearly signalled higher expectations and a determination to tackle underperformance head on. As a result, some staff have left the academy, been suspended or are having their performance carefully monitored. Academy leaders, including governors, have done much since September to challenge low ambitions and expectations, to improve academy facilities and to improve links and communication with parents.

The checks on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress are frequent and thorough. This has helped the Principal and academy leaders to quickly identify the academy's strengths and weaknesses, raise expectations and ambition and increase the accountability of staff. The Principal knows what she wants to achieve and has shared this vision for the academy with staff, pupils and parents. Staff who spoke to inspectors said that this vision is obvious and clear. Almost all staff who completed the Ofsted questionnaire said that they know what the academy is trying to achieve and that they are proud to be a member of the academy. However, a very small minority of staff have found the raised expectations difficult and challenging. As a result, their morale is low.

There has been a reduction in the number of supply teachers working at the academy. However, it has been difficult to recruit teachers for certain subjects and while capability procedures are being resolved. Pupils told inspectors that they appreciate the fact that they have fewer changes of teacher, and they consider this to be a key factor in the improved teaching they are experiencing.

New policies have been in place since September. These are appropriate and frequently checked. However, some are inconsistently applied. Where these policies are being applied effectively they are having a positive impact on the pace of pupils' progress. Ark leaders quickly identified that there were gaps in the previous vetting checks of staff. These have been quickly resolved through the effective support, advice and guidance of the Ark Schools human resources team. As a result, safeguarding arrangements are effective and secure.

The academy is making suitable provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. The specialist funding for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs has been used appropriately to improve facilities. However, the academy has not yet produced an accessibility plan to make sure that

pupils with learning difficulties are able to access all areas of academy life including the range of subjects and enrichment activities on offer.

Leaders remodelled and adapted the programme of subjects on offer in response to pupil, parent and staff consultation. The range of subjects more closely matches the capabilities and needs of the pupils. Early indications are that this is having an impact on the improved behaviour and improving standards in the academy.

Many of the staff in charge of areas of the academy's work are new to post. The Principal recognises this and has put in place a range of appropriate support. This includes Ark-led and outside agency training. It is too early to see if this help is having a sustained effect on leaders' effectiveness.

Since the previous inspection, Ark Schools have put in place a local governing body. Board members are experienced and have a broad range of appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding of their role. The minutes of the governing body meetings show that governors provide high levels of support and challenge. Governors meet regularly with leaders and ask searching questions about the information they receive.

External support

Ark Schools provide effective support for academy teachers, leaders and administrative staff. This support is sharply focused on the academy's most pressing needs and priorities. For example, the Ark School human resources team quickly and efficiently resolved the gaps in the vetting checks of staff. The Ark Network Leaders provide successful support to a range of teachers and leaders, for example the special educational needs coordinator. As a result, their practice is improving.

The academy works effectively with a range of outside agencies, including the local authority, to support pupils and their families.