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Mr C Etheridge
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Etheridge

**Special measures monitoring inspection of The International School,
Birmingham**

Following my visit with Christine Bray, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 19–20 January 2016, 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 third 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action 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

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 third monitoring inspection on 19–20 January 2016

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and middle leaders. Inspectors also met with three members of the interim executive board, including the Chair of the interim executive board, and spoke by telephone to the Chief Executive Officer of the Birmingham Education Partnership. Further meetings were held with the headteacher of Wheeler's Lane Technology College, who is providing support to the school. Inspectors spoke to pupils during breaktimes and lunchtimes and in classrooms, and met formally with groups of pupils. Inspectors visited lessons and scrutinised school documents, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour, attendance, checks made on the quality of teaching and records of pupils' achievement. The responses of 63 members of staff to Ofsted's staff questionnaire were also considered.

Context

The headteacher who was in post at the time of the previous monitoring visit retired at the end of last academic year. A new headteacher took up post in September 2015. An assistant headteacher left at the end of the last academic year. Another assistant headteacher left last term.

Two assistant headteachers took up post in September 2015. One is responsible for teaching and learning and provision for pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs and pupils who speak English as an additional language. The other has responsibility for the standards of pupils in Years 7 to 9 and provision for pupils who are eligible for pupil premium funding. A deputy headteacher, who was previously seconded to the school, was permanently appointed in January 2016 and now oversees safeguarding and the pastoral care of pupils.

In addition, two further deputy headteachers have joined the leadership team. One has responsibility for teaching and learning, the other oversees standards.

There have been further changes to teaching and support staff at the school. Since my previous visit, eight teaching staff and two members of support staff have left; 15 teachers and one member of support staff have joined the school. The school now has a largely permanent staff. There are two temporary teachers in the science department, two in mathematics and one in information technology.

The arrangements through which local authority support is delivered to the school have changed. This support is now offered by the Birmingham Education Partnership, a school improvement organisation commissioned to deliver support and improvement services to schools by Birmingham City Council.

Outcomes for pupils

The examination results of pupils who left last academic year remained below floor standards. This was expected. Overall measures of pupils' attainment were well below those achieved by other schools nationally. Only 35% of pupils secured five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics. Although this was a rise of 7% on the previous year, it remains too low. This is because standards continue to be too variable, and too often perfunctory across subject areas. Improvements were not strong enough. Weaknesses persisted in areas such as modern foreign languages and the humanities, particularly history and geography. As result, the progress made by pupils in these subject areas continues to be in the bottom 10% of schools nationally. Attainment was extremely poor in technology.

However, there was evidence of improvements. Pupils made better progress in English and mathematics than they have done in the past and the progress they made was moving closer to, though did not match, that of other pupils nationally. Pupils also achieved relatively better in religious education, art and the single sciences.

There continue to be concerning differentials between the progress and attainment of different pupil groups by the time they leave the school. The most-able pupils underachieved in English, as did boys, in stark contrast to the good progress that girls made in this subject. In mathematics, the gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates widened considerably because too few disadvantaged pupils made the progress they should have done. Pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs made slow progress in English and mathematics.

Teachers' forecasts of what pupils were expected to achieve last academic year were inaccurate in some subjects. This is because assessment practices were poor. Leaders and the interim executive board are now focused well on ensuring that monitoring and tracking systems are no longer undermined and rendered ineffective by weak, inaccurate information. It is too early for leaders to make a confident prediction of final outcomes for the pupils currently in Year 11. However, current progress information is pointing towards some potentially positive gains in pupils' achievement, including in subjects such as English, art, some technology subjects, the single sciences and religious education. Achievement in core and additional science continues to lag worryingly behind other subjects. The overall progress of the most-able pupils across all year groups is a concern. This is because teaching does not challenge these pupils enough to promote good rates of progress.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching has improved since the previous visit as result of a well-considered staff training programme, some promising new staff appointments, and the work leaders are doing to support weaker teachers. There is growing evidence of good teaching.

However, teaching is not yet good enough to raise standards quickly in some subjects, as reflected in the wide variations in pupils' outcomes across subject areas.

Pupils learn most effectively and make the strongest progress where there are positive relationships between teachers and pupils and the enthusiasm of the teacher motivates and inspires them to want to achieve well. Where this is the case, activities are planned that capture pupils' attention and support strong gains in pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. For example, in science, pupils articulated a sophisticated understanding of genetics because of the links that the teacher had made to superheroes. This made their learning memorable because it ignited their interests. In some subjects, such as English, questioning is used successfully to engage pupils, probe their understanding and demand that pupils think more deeply by offering additional reasoning or explanations to support their ideas. Across subjects, lessons are increasingly well structured and learning is delivered with a greater sense of urgency.

Where learning is weaker, pupils' progress is stifled by tasks that are dull and mundane, or poorly paced. When this is the case, pupils quickly become bored, lose focus and begin to engage in low-level disruption. Some teachers do not pick up on these behaviours quickly enough. Although expectations are higher, they are not yet high enough in all classrooms. Tasks are set that are not challenging enough or pupils spend too long working on activities that do not stretch them to make the progress they are capable of. Conversely, some pupils flounder because they have not been given sufficient support or direction. This happens because some teachers do not consider pupils' prior abilities or skills in their planning or do not check carefully enough how well pupils are learning during the course of the lesson. Some teachers too readily accept underdeveloped answers from pupils so that questioning does not help them to learn better or support pupils' oracy skills.

The quality of teachers' feedback is improving and increasingly reflects the guidance set out in the school's marking policy. At its best, this feedback helps pupils to close the gaps in their learning or encourages pupils to extend their learning further. Sometimes the impact of this feedback continues to be hindered because it is not focused sharply on helping pupils to improve their subject-specific skills.

Many teachers now have higher expectations and are insisting that pupils complete all of the work that has been set for them. Pupils say that their teachers are now demanding more from them. Pupils are generally presenting their work better and more are beginning to take a pride in their work. Nevertheless, pupils' handwriting continues to be variable and sometimes poor.

The deployment of teaching assistants is too variable. Sometimes they are not used as efficiently or effectively as they should be, so the impact of their support on pupils' learning is limited.

Teachers are increasingly well focused on developing the literacy skills of pupils in subjects outside of English. A range of training has been delivered to help teachers better support pupils who speak English as an additional language. Teachers share and explain key words and subject-specific terminology for pupils and adapt resources to accommodate pupils' language needs. Teachers were seen demonstrating how to write responses and helping pupils to structure their writing by offering them sentence starters. Not all teachers are sufficiently skilled in using these approaches; some are not able to gauge successfully the right level of support to offer pupils.

In addition, leaders are now operating an extensive range of well-coordinated support programmes to promote gains in the literacy skills of pupils who struggle with their reading and writing, and for those who speak English as an additional language. Some work to promote improvements in pupils' numeracy skills is being undertaken, but this has not yet been driven across the curriculum.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

A new behaviour policy was introduced at the beginning of the academic year. Pupils are unanimous that this policy has made a considerable difference to standards of behaviour across the school. This policy is suitably focused on recognising and rewarding positive behaviour. Pupils welcome and value the positive reinforcement they receive because they feel 'the good pupils and not just the naughty ones' are acknowledged. They also confirm that nearly all teachers apply the policy consistently. Any negative behaviour is followed up with sanctions which pupils say they 'can't get out of'. Pupils' clear understanding of the consequences of poor behaviour is helping some become more self-disciplined. Pupils feel that this is contributing to the sense of higher expectations and raised standards in the school. Pupils say that they are now 'heading towards a common goal'.

In lessons, most pupils demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and behave well. Incidents of disruptive behaviour observed by inspectors were few and far between and inextricably linked to weak teaching. In such instances, pupils talk among themselves about issues not related to their work or talk when their teacher is trying to address the class; these behaviours are not challenged quickly enough, and pupils can be slow to comply with the teacher's instructions. In these cases, this disorder has a detrimental effect upon the learning of pupils in the class. Pupils generally conduct themselves sensibly around the school site. Pupils are supervised well and monitored closely during informal times of the day, including in the canteen. These high levels of supervision are promoting more orderly conduct, a reduction in incidents of poor behaviour and increasing promptness to lessons. Occasionally, some boisterous behaviour on the corridors occurs, and some pupils continue to be too slow in moving to lessons at the end of breaktimes.

The school's records illustrate improvements to pupils' behaviour this academic year, with far fewer incidents of verbal abuse and aggressive behaviour than in the past. Pupils' views confirm this. Leaders are using the information they gather about behaviour to proactively target 'hot-spots' such as times of the day and key locations in the school where negative behaviour may occur and thus bring about improvements over time. Fixed-term exclusions are now beginning to reduce and work is undertaken to support pupils in improving their behaviour when they return to school.

Attendance remains too low and in the bottom 10% of schools nationally. Too many pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, are regularly absent from school. Leaders have not ignored this issue. A wide range of work is being undertaken to promote improvements. However, this work has not yielded a good enough impact.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The new headteacher has had a positive impact on the culture and ethos of the school. Discussions with members of staff and responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire show that the large majority of staff are galvanised and positively focused in their efforts to improve the school. The accelerated pace of improvements since September testifies to this. The largely substantive teaching staff and leadership team is a refreshing contrast to the fragmented school community I encountered during my first visit. This stability is now supporting the school's capacity to deliver sustained improvements.

Many actions have been completed since my previous visit. This reflects the urgency and determination with which leaders are bringing about change. New leadership appointments have added much-needed strength and expertise to some key areas. This work is supported by increasingly rigorous and robust systems. The impact of leaders on the quality of teaching, behaviour and to some extent pupils' achievement is emerging more strongly. However, leaders understand that they have considerable challenges ahead in order to secure high enough standards for the pupils who attend the school. Some leaders are not yet focused sharply enough on gauging the impact of their work. This limits their ability to evaluate how successful their actions have been and therefore inform further improvements.

Some robust action has taken place to improve safeguarding documentation. This includes an overhaul of the single central record, informed by visits to other schools and external checks. This is now a comprehensive and well-kept document, more than fulfilling statutory requirements. The safeguarding policy has also been rewritten. In contrast to the disparate, deficient policies operated at the time of the previous visit, this is now a very largely comprehensive document. It offers staff clear guidance to support them in identifying a broad range of risks and sets out unambiguous procedures to report any concerns. This has been supported by an ongoing programme of training. Staff clearly articulate their understanding of

safeguarding protocols and this is further reflected in the school's referral records. Pupils also demonstrate a good awareness of a range of risks they may face, including those of gangs, extremism, knife crime, e-safety and bullying. They trust that their teachers will resolve any problems they report.

Plans are now being implemented that are deploying pupil premium funding with greater care and focus than in the past. However, further work needs to be done to drive effective practice into classrooms and give this crucial issue the prominence needed in order to make a significant difference to the achievement and attendance of this key pupil group.

Middle leadership is strengthening. These leaders are now involved in systematic monitoring and evaluation processes. These are helping them to identify underperformance and underachievement more robustly. As a result, they demonstrate an increasingly accurate awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their areas, and are putting in place more targeted actions to bring about improvements. Line managers are offering greater challenge and support and further developing the work of these leaders, as is external support. Subject leaders are now benefiting from the more stable staffing within their teams. This is freeing up their capacity to lead and deliver on improvement issues. Subject teams are also able to reap the rewards of sharing good practice in teaching.

However, middle leadership remains inconsistent in both quality and impact. The coordinator with responsibility for pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs continues to lack a strategic overview of the performance of this area. Weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation, including checking the work of teaching assistants, persist. Insufficient work has been undertaken on the training of staff. This means that the deficiencies in both the leadership and quality of provision within this area recognised during my previous visit and in the previous inspection have not been addressed adequately. This is a concern.

The interim executive board continue to deploy their expertise to perform their duties robustly. They offer both challenge and support to leaders and ask searching questions to get to the core of improvement issues.

Board members have now established a clear overview of the financial position of the school and are beginning to take steps to ensure that the school's finances are stabilised and the long-term strategic direction of the school is secured. They are very clear on the next steps the school needs to take in order to improve and are holding leaders to account for delivering these. The work of the interim executive board further benefits from external quality assurance.

External support

In a relatively short space of time, the Birmingham Education Partnership has established a firm understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's work. This is informed by incisive, rigorous and objective monitoring of the school's performance. These checks on the work of leaders and the interim executive board are supporting the quickened pace of improvements this academic year.

The lead support headteacher continues to play a critical role in supporting the strategic direction of the school and the development of leadership capacity. This work has also involved ensuring the effective transition between headteachers.