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Mrs Herminder Channa
Ark Boulton Academy
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Birmingham
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Dear Mrs Channa

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ark Boulton Academy

Following my visit with David Hughes, Ofsted Inspector, and Elizabeth Ellis-Martin, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy on 15–16 March 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 that 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 that took place in June 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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 am of the opinion that the school may appoint two newly qualified teachers to the science department. If appointed, these teachers should receive additional support from the Ark Schools' support programme.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham City Council. 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 that took place in June 2015.

- 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
 - using 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 second monitoring inspection on 15–16 March 2016

Evidence

During this two-day inspection, inspectors observed the school's work and held meetings with the principal, school leaders, staff, the chair of the governing body and representatives from Ark Schools, the school's sponsor. Inspectors observed pupils' learning in a range of subjects across the school. During these observations, inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke to them about their learning. Inspectors also spoke informally to pupils about behaviour, attendance, how they learn to keep themselves safe and what it feels like to be a pupil at Ark Boulton Academy. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour as they arrived at the school, during an assembly, at breaks and lunchtimes as well as in lessons. Inspectors looked at a range of documents including the checks on staff's suitability to work with children, the minutes of governors' meetings and the school's information about pupils' progress, attainment, behaviour and attendance. Inspectors took account of the 29 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, for these to be considered.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection visit in December 2015, one vice-principal, three science teachers and an English teacher have left the school. Four teachers joined the school in January. The process of restructuring the school staff and leadership team continues. A significant number of staff are suspended. The final outcomes of these capability and competency issues are still to be resolved.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal, an increasing number of school leaders, governors and the school's sponsor continue to tackle effectively the deep-seated issues they inherited. The principal describes this process as peeling and uncovering the different layers of an onion. It is clear to inspectors that as each new issue is uncovered and identified, it is quickly confronted head-on. However, this process means that the school's progress and improvement are not as rapid as school leaders, governors and the sponsor would wish. The morale of a few staff continues to be low as a result of the ongoing restructuring process and challenges to underperformance. Leaders are, however, rewarding and celebrating effective practice.

The school's self-evaluation is accurate and rightly identifies the long-standing and emerging issues. This evaluation informs appropriate and detailed whole-school improvement plans. The major barrier to rapid improvement continues to be the difficulty in recruiting staff in key subjects and positions. The Ark Schools' recruitment team is fully supporting the school in trying to resolve this issue. For

example, they are offering 'golden handshakes' for teachers of English, mathematics, science, geography and history, and relocation packages for teachers joining from outside the Birmingham area. As a result, the school has begun to successfully recruit teachers, including from Australia.

Leaders have remodelled the curriculum to better suit the needs, capabilities and aspirations of the pupils. For example, increased lesson time has been given to English, mathematics and support sessions for those needing to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. Staff and pupils are appreciative of this. The curriculum is broad and balanced and includes opportunities for the pupils to study music, art and drama. Early indications are that this is having a positive impact on pupils' academic progress.

An increasing number of middle leaders are managing their area of responsibility effectively. This is particularly the case in English, mathematics, science, performing and creative arts, and modern foreign languages. However, weaknesses remain in the leadership of history, geography, special educational needs and disability, and key stage 4 culture and ethos. The principal and vice-principal are aware of these issues and are taking appropriate action to support and challenge leaders who do not meet the school's expectations.

The monitoring of the majority of the school's work is relentless and helps leaders to identify areas of underperformance quickly. Effective leaders use this information to create and implement appropriate improvement plans. However, a minority of leaders do not routinely use the information that is available to them, such as that for pupils' progress and behaviour, to put in place appropriate intervention and support. As a result, pupils do not make the progress expected of them academically or socially in the areas that are led ineffectively.

The school continues to arrange provision for pupils who have special educational needs or disability. The needs of the pupils have been identified and support put in place. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has not been checked. In addition, the school's policy for special educational needs and disability and the accessibility plan, while in place, are weak. As a result, pupils who have special educational needs or disability are not doing well, especially in English in Years 9 and 11.

Safeguarding is effective. The principal, staff and governors make sure that protecting pupils from harm and supporting potentially vulnerable pupils and their families is a high priority. The procedures to recruit staff are thorough and rigorous. For example, the identities of potential employees are checked meticulously. Staff, including supply staff, have been trained appropriately in child protection and safeguarding issues, including the duty to prevent pupils from being exposed to extreme or radical messages. Staff understand their safeguarding duties and have the necessary knowledge and understanding to ensure that pupils are safe. The school site is secure and risk assessments are in place for trips, visits and other

potentially hazardous activities. Pupils have opportunities to develop their understanding of how to keep safe from potential risks and dangers, for example from the use of social media. However, leaders have not ensured that all pupils fully understand the risks associated with the carrying and use of offensive weapons.

The local governing body provides rigorous and effective challenge and support. Members of the governing body have a wide range of expertise and experience and use this to hold leaders to account. Governors have a clear ambition and drive to improve the quality of education. The impact of the pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up premium is closely monitored. As a result, the achievement gap between pupils who are disadvantaged and their classmates is closing, and the vast majority of the Year 7 pupils eligible for the Year 7 catch-up premium are improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Pupils told inspectors that there has been a significant improvement in the quality of teaching across many subjects. The evidence seen during this inspection and from a scrutiny of pupils' books supports their view. Teaching is improving, but the quality remains variable, particularly in lessons taken by supply teachers.

The teaching of almost all permanent staff is increasingly effective. Pupils learn successfully because teachers use the information they have about pupils' capabilities and progress to plan appropriate learning activities that meet their needs. Pupils' understanding is closely monitored through effective questioning and checks on pupils' work. Lessons are modified as needed so that misunderstandings and misconceptions are corrected. The pace of learning is appropriate as pupils have time to consolidate their understanding, while other pupils have opportunities to move on quickly in order to deepen and develop their knowledge. Teachers' verbal and written comments help pupils to refine and improve their work. As a result, pupils, including the most able, those with special educational needs or disability and those who are disadvantaged, do well.

The majority of supply teachers do not ensure that pupils do well. In these lessons, there is insufficient challenge, especially for the most able, and the needs of pupils with special educational needs or disability are not always met. As a consequence, they do not make the progress expected of them. This is particularly the case in Years 8 and 9. The expectations of the majority of supply teachers do not match those of the permanent staff. As a result, pupils are allowed to complete work that is poorly presented or does not match their ability. Leaders are providing training and support for supply teachers and there is evidence that this is having a positive impact on teachers' performance. However, there is a high turnover of supply staff which means that the long-term impact of this training is reduced.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

In lessons, pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning vary considerably and closely reflect the teachers' different expectations and the quality of teaching. When the level of challenge and the pace of learning are inappropriate, pupils become distracted and inattentive and do not produce enough work of a reasonable quality. However, where teachers have high expectations of what pupils will learn and do, pupils respond positively and enthusiastically as they are keen to learn and do well. This is demonstrated in pupils' books where the quality of work is often of a high standard and shows that pupils are doing well.

While the majority of pupils are friendly, polite and well mannered, there is a significant minority of pupils, particularly in Year 9, who are rude, uncooperative and disobedient. This group of pupils ignore reasonable requests to concentrate on their learning and to produce work of a quality that matches their ability. Leaders are fully aware of this group and have put in place a range of support and interventions to help pupils modify their behaviour. For example, Ark Boulton Academy is working in collaboration with Ark Kings Academy to offer alternative provision and support for pupils with challenging behaviour. Some pupils are responding to this help but there are still some who do not behave appropriately. As a consequence, the number of fixed-term exclusions has increased as the school demonstrates that it will not tolerate unacceptable behaviour that impacts negatively on the learning of other pupils. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that they value the school's efforts to improve pupils' behaviour as they find the disruptions irritating and a barrier to their learning.

Pupils' attendance is improving and the number of pupils who are persistently absent (missing more than 10% of lessons) is reducing as a result of the effective strategies, including the collaboration with external agencies, to improve pupils' attendance.

Pupils enjoy coming to the school and appreciate the help and support they receive from the large majority of staff. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that they can see that the school is improving. The vast majority of pupils who spoke with inspectors said that they feel safe and know how to avoid potential risks and dangers. The school provides a range of 'well-being and welfare' lessons and assemblies including careers information, advice and guidance. However, the effectiveness of these sessions has not been evaluated by school leaders.

Outcomes for pupils

Much work is being done to improve the quality of learning, teaching and assessment and to accelerate pupils' progress. The evidence seen during this inspection, including information provided by the school and the work in pupils' books, shows that standards are rising, particularly in Year 11 and especially in art, Urdu and Arabic. Pupils' progress is also secure in mathematics, particularly in Year

10, in French and in pupils' reading skills, especially in Year 7. However, the legacy of poor teaching remains and groups of pupils, for example those who have special educational needs or disability, do not do well in a range of subjects across the school. This is particularly the case in English in Years 9 and 11. Pupils' progress still depends very much on the teacher they have.

Pupils who are disadvantaged are doing well in a range of subjects across the school. The achievement gap between this group of pupils and others in the school is closing.

The most-able pupils are doing well in a variety of subjects in Years 7, 10 and 11. However, this group of pupils are not making the progress expected of them in Years 8 and 9. This is primarily due to these year groups having a significant number of lessons taught by supply teachers.

School leaders have correctly identified that girls are doing significantly better than boys in key stage 3, that pupils' writing skills need improving in all year groups, and that pupils are not doing well in geography and history in key stages 3 and 4. Leaders and staff are tackling these issues. For example, they provide intervention and catch-up sessions during and after the school day, at weekends and during holidays. However, a significant and sustained improvement in pupils' outcomes is yet to be seen.

External support

The school's sponsor, Ark Schools, continues to provide largely effective support. This is now sharply focused on resolving staff recruitment issues. Ark Schools is doing this by offering financial incentives. As a result, four members of staff took up post in January and a number of staff have been recruited to start in April and September 2016. Leading professionals from the Ark Schools' network provide appropriate training for leaders and teachers. One member of staff spoke for many when they said, 'Ark training is great.' The quality of learning and teaching in many subjects is improving as a result. However, the sponsor has not ensured that all the school's policies are fully compliant with current government guidance, and that subsequent practice is routinely monitored, reviewed and evaluated.