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Chris Etheridge
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Dear Mr Etheridge

Special measures monitoring inspection of The International School, Birmingham

Following my visit with Mark Bailie, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 26–27 April 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 fourth 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 regional schools commissioner, 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.

An external review of governance and of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 26 and 27 April 2016

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with you, as 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. I spoke by telephone to the chief executive officer of the Birmingham Education Partnership. Further meetings were held with the headteacher of Wheelers 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.

Context

Since the previous visit, the head of physical education has left the school. The head of the mathematics department and a teacher of physical education have resigned. New appointments to fill these vacancies have been made for September. The school has five temporary teachers, all in science, mathematics and information technology.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher, supported by a strengthened and increasingly confident team of senior leaders, has acted with determination to tackle the issues raised in the previous monitoring inspection. Considerable work has been undertaken to bring about improvements. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the school's work, previously sorely lacking or ineffective, are now in place and leaders have continued to refine and embed them. Consequently, leaders have a realistic and increasingly accurate view of the school's performance and have identified those areas where their work needs to make a greater difference.

Since his arrival in September, the headteacher has invigorated the school and endeavoured to create a cohesive school community in which teachers and support staff are galvanised in their efforts to make sure that current pupils are making better progress and catching up on ground lost. Leaders are striving to raise the aspirations of staff and pupils in order to build a culture of high expectations. For example, in a Year 10 assembly, pupils were encouraged to think hard and reflect on their ambitions. The values of determination, effort and resilience were promoted well. Although leaders' work has resulted in improving the quality of teaching and learning and aspects of pupils' behaviour, improvement in some areas is still patchy.

Much work has been undertaken to develop the skills and abilities of middle leaders. These leaders have benefited from, and have valued, the training they have been given. They are working increasingly cohesively to develop and implement strategies to bring about improvements. As a result, subject leadership is strengthening, particularly in core subjects. These leaders have an increasingly diagnostic view of how well pupils are doing in their subject areas and know the pupils that need extra help in order to make progress. Subject leaders are taking increased responsibility for checking and quality assuring the work of their teams. Consequently, many of these leaders can better explain the impact they are having. Nevertheless, these processes remain in their early days. Some are still not fully aware of the best way to support improvements in teaching in their subject. Much work still remains to be done if these leaders are to reduce the variability between pupils' learning, achievement and the quality of teaching across subject areas. Additional support for the leader of special educational needs has helped this leader to develop a clearer understanding of their role, responsibilities and accountability for ensuring that this key group of pupils make good progress. In addition, since my previous visit, further training has been delivered to staff to help them better support pupils who have special educational needs or disability and pupils who are relatively new to English in the classroom. The progress of pupils who have special educational needs or disability, however, remains a concern.

Strengthened performance management procedures, more systematic checks on teaching, regular staff training and support packages offered for individual teachers are slowly improving the quality of teaching. A now largely stable and substantive workforce of teachers is enabling leaders to build sustainable improvements.

The deployment of additional funding for pupils eligible for the pupil premium is increasingly well focused on raising the attainment and aspirations of this group and improving their attendance. A range of additional support has now been implemented. An action plan and some training have raised the awareness of staff of this crucial issue. Necessary infrastructure has been put in place to further develop provision. However, these strategies are in their early days and have some way to go if the school is to close the gaps in the achievement and attendance of this group of pupils with that of other pupils in the school. Strategies to boost the literacy and numeracy skills of low-ability pupils who enter the school are increasingly well coordinated. Since my previous visit, for example, targeted interventions to support pupils with weaker number skills have been taking place. However, it is too early to gauge the impact of this aspect of the school's work.

The interim executive board continues to use their expertise and experience to both challenge and support leaders to bring about improvements. Regular reporting from the headteacher ensures that they are kept well informed about the progress the school is making. They are continuing to take effective action to secure the financial stability of the school, despite the considerable challenges of poor record keeping in the past, and a deficit budget. The board have reviewed a wealth of the school's

policies to ensure that they are fit for purpose. 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.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is improving. Leaders have continued to deliver training that has tackled the issues from the previous inspection, and previous monitoring visit, and are monitoring the quality of teaching carefully. The critical mass is now shifting and more teaching is good. However, leaders recognise that the pace of improvements has been slow, and that inconsistencies continue to persist both within and across subjects.

The strongest teaching is characterised by highly positive relationships between teachers and pupils, built on high expectations, so that pupils are engaged in and value their learning. Teachers' good subject knowledge ensures that their planning helps pupils to build on their skills over time. Where this is the case, teachers use their knowledge of their pupils to make sure that they get the right levels of support. In an English lesson, for example, the teacher's use of praise and encouragement reinforced high expectations and built a positive climate for learning in which pupils were enthused and motivated to learn. Close checks on how well pupils were learning, informed by astute awareness of pupils' literacy needs, enabled the right level of support to be offered so that pupils made good progress.

Training has equipped teachers with strategies to check pupils' learning. These strategies are helping many teachers to focus more purposefully on how well pupils' are learning in lessons and over time. Increasingly, teachers are building opportunities into lessons for pupils to reflect on what they have learned and thus consolidate their learning. However, some checks that teachers make are still too cursory. Some teachers still do not use questioning well enough to ensure that pupils have a deep and secure understanding of important concepts, and some are happy to accept superficial responses from pupils. In some cases the benefits of questioning are diluted because this part of the lesson is poorly managed, in that some pupils are not sufficiently involved and do not participate. Despite a greater focus on different pupils' needs in teachers' planning, some teachers continue to struggle to pitch work at the right level. Where learning is weaker, it is typified by a lack of pace and challenge, so that pupils are not set work that is difficult enough, or teachers do not ensure that pupils learn at the rate at which they are capable. Conversely, some pupils struggle with work because it is pitched too high and they have not been given the support they need. Where this is the case pupils work too slowly, disengage or lose interest in their work.

Pupils' presentation of work is improving in response to the higher expectations of many teachers. Pupils' better progress is reflected in the greater quantity and better quality of work that they are now producing, and teachers are increasingly insisting

that pupils write legibly, fluently and with accuracy. The feedback teachers offer on pupils' work is increasingly helping pupils to make progress and continues to reflect school policy with growing consistency. However, some pupils are not fully secure on their current achievements or what they need to do better.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The behaviour policy and systems introduced at the time of my previous visit have continued to improve pupils' behaviour in lessons, and pupils are, in the main, demonstrating positive attitudes to learning and good conduct in lessons. Pupils describe a sharp contrast between the more focused learning that takes place in lessons now, and the chaotic disruption of the past. There was little evidence seen by inspectors of disruption to lessons. However, where teaching is weaker and does not enthuse pupils, pupils are listless, and can stray off task.

A new system introduced since my previous visit has improved the efficiency of pupils' movement between lessons. This has reduced considerably pupils' lateness to lessons. However, this has also resulted in some running, pushing and shoving on the corridors as pupils endeavour to get to their lessons on time, and avoid sanctions. During breaktimes and lunchtimes, pupils are supervised well and the atmosphere is high-spirited but friendly. Inspectors did see some boisterous behaviour exhibited by some pupils in the canteen, and litter left by pupils. Nevertheless, canteen staff felt that pupils were in the main polite and respectful, and that only a few pupils were responsible for litter.

Many pupils continue to express with confidence the lack of bullying in the school, and say that it is a safe place. They value systems such as the 'Sharp' system that enables them to report any concerns they may have. However, some younger pupils comment that name calling takes place and that they find this intimidating.

Many pupils demonstrate an understanding of a range of risks, but some cannot articulate clearly enough how to keep safe from extremist views. Although a personal development programme is in place, leaders do not evaluate sharply enough the impact of this on pupils' attitudes, values and ideas. Leaders have continued to deliver training to ensure that staff understand how to keep pupils safe and have worked effectively with a range of organisations to tackle any problems emerging in the local community that may affect pupils' well-being. There is now a need to ensure that, given the range of staff changes that took place in September, level 1 child protection training is undertaken.

Leaders have continued to work hard to raise pupils' attendance, deploying a wide range of strategies and resources to bring about improvements. Despite these efforts, leaders have struggled to secure improvement. Attendance remains too low and in the bottom 10% of schools nationally. Too many pupils, particularly those from vulnerable groups, are regularly absent from school. This is a concern. Leaders

recognise this and have recently reviewed their attendance policy in order to strengthen their work in this area.

Outcomes for pupils

Final published examination performance information for pupils who left last academic year does not reflect the overall achievements of pupils in this year group. This is because a number of pupils who were in Year 11 were not eligible to be counted in the figures. The school's records of pupils' achievement last year reflect the inconsistent picture of improvements reported in my previous letter.

Much work has taken place to strengthen assessment systems in the school. Systematic internal moderation of teachers' assessments undertaken in subject teams has been supplemented by a range of checks undertaken by external partners. These external checks have, for example, challenged the quality and accuracy of teachers' assessments in some areas and resulted in adjustments being made. As a result, leaders and the interim executive board have growing confidence in the information they have about the progress and attainment of current pupils in the school.

The school's analyses of the achievement of current pupils demonstrate that the work leaders have undertaken, coupled with improvements in the quality of teaching, is accelerating the progress of current pupils in the school. However, although pupils are now making quicker progress than they have done in the past, for older pupils, this is against the backdrop of a legacy of long-term, sustained underachievement. Broad-reaching historic failures in leadership and management, and of teaching, have compromised pupils' outcomes. In core and additional science, for example, pupils in the current Year 11 are expected to attain well below the national average, and indeed, current information demonstrates little, if any, gain on that of previous years. Nevertheless, the new head of science has quickly established the causes of pupils' underachievement and is taking appropriate remedial action that has resulted in demonstrable gains in pupils' progress in a relatively short space of time. Subjects where stronger achievement is expected include the single sciences, religious education and some vocational subjects. Positive improvements are showing in some of the technology subjects, where achievement has previously been extremely poor.

A recent initiative, the 'fab 500', has challenged subject leaders to raise the achievement of pupils in year 11. This has been welcomed by leaders and teachers and provided a useful focus for staff. This has yielded some successful improvements, particularly in English and mathematics. However, there is no doubt that necessary work being undertaken in Year 11 is a considerable drain on capacity to improve the achievement of pupils in other year groups.

Pupils were observed making better progress in English as a result of well-considered assessment strategies and a carefully planned curriculum that enable pupils to build their knowledge, skills and understanding over time. Likewise, in mathematics, increasingly effective use of assessment is helping teachers to target their teaching towards the areas of pupils' skills that are weaker, and thus close gaps in their learning.

In some subjects, teaching is not raising standards quickly enough. Where this is the case, learning is too superficial, so that pupils do not secure a strong enough understanding of key ideas and concepts. In French, for example, a lack of challenge in learning over time means that pupils have struggled to acquire a good enough grasp of key vocabulary and grammar to achieve well. This lack of deep conceptual understanding was also evident in geography, where tasks and activities are not demanding enough of pupils' learning, and assessment information lacks accuracy. Temporary teaching in information technology has had a negative impact on the achievement of pupils in this subject across all year groups.

Amid broad improvements, variations between the outcomes of different groups of pupils remain. Boys, though making better progress than in previous years, continue to lag behind girls, particularly in English. The slow progress of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly in Year 11, and the wide gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates are concerns.

External support

The lead support headteacher continues to play a critical role in supporting the strategic direction of the school and the development of leadership capacity. Commissioned support has helped to develop middle leadership, including leadership of special educational needs, and to check the accuracy of assessment information in subjects. The seconded appointment of a deputy headteacher has added valuable capacity to strengthen work undertaken to improve teaching. The Birmingham Education Partnership has continued to check on the progress of the school, and have, for example, a clear view of the performance of pupils. They have wisely chosen to undertake a full external evaluation of provision later in the term.

Following this inspection, the school should take further action to:

- improve attendance, and reduce the number of pupils who are regularly absent from school, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs or disability.