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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 Bernice Astling, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 28 and 29 June 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 third 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 three newly qualified teachers, one each to the English, science and geography departments. 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. 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, and 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 school has a secure and sustainable leadership team.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 28 and 29 June 2016

Evidence

During this inspection, inspectors observed pupils' learning in lessons across all year groups and in a range of subjects. Some of the observations were done jointly with the vice-principal. Inspectors also visited a Year 10 assembly. Meetings were held with you, school leaders and four members of the governing body and trust. Discussions were held with pupils, parents and members of staff, including subject and curriculum leaders. The views of parents were also noted from the 226 responses to the school's own questionnaire to parents. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, for these to be considered. The views of staff were considered from the 34 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire.

Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's analysis of pupils' current attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance. Additional documentation was scrutinised, including the school's information about pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the vetting checks on staff new to the school.

Context

The school no longer uses supply teachers on a day-to-day basis. The school has one vacant subject leadership post. Apart from this position, the school is fully staffed for September 2016. An assistant principal with responsibility for inclusion, accessibility and special educational needs and/or disabilities started at the school in April. You have appointed a curriculum leader for key stage 4 mathematics and two vice-principals, who will start in September. The vice-principals will have responsibility for pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare and for teaching, learning and assessment. All of the Year 7 pupil places for 2016/17 have been filled. During this inspection, pupils were following the 2016/17 timetable. Year 11 pupils were on study leave and were not in the school.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

You, school leaders, governors and the trust have continued to address the many deep-rooted issues you inherited. You have shared your vision with pupils, parents and staff of how the school will provide an outstanding education and how this will be achieved. The staffing and leadership reorganisation has been completed and, apart from one vacancy, the school will be fully staffed at the start of the autumn term. The school no longer uses day-to-day supply teachers. Staff told inspectors that this has had a major impact on improving the atmosphere in the school and on the consistent application of the school's policies. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that the quality of teaching and pupils' behaviour are improving as a result of the stability in staffing.

Staff are excited about the future and looking forward to playing their part in helping Ark Boulton Academy provide an outstanding education for its pupils. Almost all of the staff who completed the inspection questionnaire agree that the school is well led and managed and that they are proud to be a member of staff at the school. A member of staff said that, 'Herminder fills us all with confidence in the way she leads the school,' and another stated that 'Herminder is an inspiration'. You are aware that a very small minority of staff's morale is still low. You are committed to addressing this and working towards resolving issues that cause upset.

Positive links have been forged with parents through consultation and parental engagement meetings and by holding a weekly drop-in surgery. Parents who spoke with inspectors said that they have been impressed with the level of commitment and determination shown by staff and leaders in making sure that their children do well. One parent commented, 'My child now has a future where before they had none'. A large majority of parents who completed the school's questionnaire agree that their child is making good progress and that the needs of their child are being met.

The recently appointed assistant principal with responsibility for inclusion and accessibility is checking the effectiveness of the intervention and support for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Appropriate action is then taken where necessary. For example, the leader has identified that not all staff are using the agreed strategies to support pupils' needs and has provided training to address this weakness. As a result, information provided by the school shows that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are doing as well as other pupils across all year groups.

During this inspection, pupils were following the 2016/17 timetable. The vast majority of staff who spoke to inspectors said that the increased time for English, mathematics and science was helping to speed up pupils' progress in these subjects. The vast majority of pupils agreed.

Despite the many improvements, you are aware that weaknesses in leadership and management remain. For example, the objectives of the school's marking and feedback policy are not being met because not all teachers apply the policy consistently. In addition, the analysis of the information about pupils' behaviour and attendance is not thorough and detailed. As a consequence, leaders are not always able to provide bespoke intervention and support for pupils whose behaviour or attendance causes concern.

Members of the local governing body and members of the Ark Schools' trust board continue to promote a 'no excuses' culture and provide timely and effective support to you, school leaders and staff. Governors have made sure that the school's improvement momentum is maintained and that underperformance is quickly and successfully addressed.

Staffing and recruitment issues have largely been resolved as a result of the backing and support of governors. For example, financial incentives have been agreed in order to attract teachers and leaders. Governors have also supported you in taking action against staff who have not met the school's expectations. Governors provide a high level of challenge through asking specific and focused questions about the school's performance. Governors visit the school regularly and report their findings at the full local governing body meetings. Governors make sure that actions are followed up and the impact measured, for example, through a series of governor visits focused on the provision for pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. The provision for this group of pupils was improved as a result.

The school's arrangements to make sure that pupils are safe continue to be effective. Staff's suitability to work with children is thoroughly checked. Staff new to the school have prompt and suitable training to make sure that they have the knowledge and understanding to be able to identify and support potentially vulnerable pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Despite further improvements in the quality of learning, teaching and assessment, the quality remains variable.

Teaching is particularly effective in French, religious studies, art and in an increasing number of science and English lessons. Pupils at Ark Boulton Academy make the most progress when teachers use the information they have about what pupils know and can do to plan learning activities that meet the needs and abilities of individuals. In these lessons, pupils are able to improve their work as a result of the specific and focused written and verbal feedback they receive. In addition, pupils' behaviour is well managed and the majority of learning time is used effectively to make sure that pupils make progress. However, pupils make less progress when the teaching fails to address the gaps in their learning or deepen their knowledge and understanding. In these lessons, pupils do not receive helpful comments about the quality of their work and how to improve. Some teachers fail to identify pupils' errors and do not provide the help pupils need to rectify their mistakes. Where teaching is ineffective, a significant minority of pupils misbehave in class and their behaviour is not well managed. Pupils' progress is inhibited as a result.

Apart from in Year 7, pupils do not do well in mathematics. A large majority of pupils have significant gaps in their knowledge and are unable to apply their mathematical skills confidently and quickly. Pupils have insufficient opportunities to solve increasingly difficult problems or to reason mathematically. Pupils who are struggling to understand the work do not have access to a range of teaching approaches or resources that would enable them to grasp basic ideas and concepts. Pupils who find the work easy are not challenged to deepen their understanding. A large majority of pupils are unsure about how to improve their work as they do not receive helpful written or verbal comments about what they have done wrong and what they need to do to improve.

You are aware that across the school, teachers are not making sure that the most able pupils have work and activities that fully develop their abilities, skills and talents. The most able pupils often have to complete tasks that are dull and uninspiring and lack challenge. As a result, this group of pupils is not doing well in a range of subjects.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Since the previous inspection, there has been an improvement in pupils' behaviour. Staff and leaders have worked effectively to re-establish the school's behaviour expectations. Pupils' conduct and behaviour around the school are generally appropriate and pupils willingly follow the school's rules. For example, inspectors noted that pupils consistently walked on the left in corridors as instructed. The number of fixed-term exclusions and incidents of poor behaviour has reduced and the number of rewards for positive behaviour has increased significantly.

Where teaching is engaging and interesting, pupils' attitudes to learning are generally appropriate and make a positive contribution to the learning atmosphere in classes. However, there is still a significant minority of pupils who are openly defiant and rude to staff. For example, some pupils do not follow reasonable requests to line up at the end of breaktimes or lunchtimes and are disrespectful to staff when asked to follow instructions.

Pupils' overall attendance is just below the national average. However, the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is below that of other pupils. Leaders accept that the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent (missing more than 10% of lessons) is too high and needs to be reduced quickly.

The school actively promotes fundamental British values and the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The school's range of lessons and subjects ensures that pupils have opportunities to study different religions, faiths and cultures, music, French, drama and art. Personal, social and health education lessons provide pupils with opportunities to learn about relationships, safety and how to stay healthy. In addition, pupils have careers information, advice and guidance, which pupils told inspectors helps them to think about their careers or next steps in education or training. The majority of pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in the school and that issues are quickly and successfully resolved. Parents and staff who completed questionnaires agree with this view. However, a very small minority of younger pupils told inspectors that they had witnessed incidents of bullying and racism which were resolved only if they were reported to staff.

Outcomes for pupils

The work to improve the quality of learning, teaching and assessment and to speed up pupils' progress has been maintained. Information provided by the school shows that pupils generally are doing well in art, French, science, religious studies, mathematics in Year 7, history at key stage 4 and English in Years 8 and 9. However, pupils are not doing well in geography, English in Year 7, mathematics in Years 8, 9 and 10, and history in key stage 3. The quality of learning and teaching observed during this inspection and the work in pupils' books confirm the evidence from the school's information.

The progress of pupils who are disadvantaged is variable across the school. Pupils who are disadvantaged do as well as other pupils in English in key stage 3 and Year 10 and in mathematics in Year 8. However, pupils who are disadvantaged do not do as well as other pupils in mathematics in Years 7, 9 and 10 and in science in key stage 3.

The recently appointed assistant principal for inclusion and accessibility has provided training for staff on how to meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Information provided by the school shows that this group of pupils is beginning to make similar progress to other pupils.

Leaders recognise that the progress made by the most able pupils remains an issue. This is primarily due to the legacy of poor teaching and high staff turnover. Leaders and staff show a determination to make sure that the most able pupils are quickly identified, and challenging work and activities put in place to help them make the most of their abilities, skills and talents. However, it is too early to see the sustained impact of this work.

Pupils' reading skills are improving as a result of the concerted effort to make sure that pupils read widely and often. You have introduced 'Drop Everything And Read' time at the end of every day, so that pupils have opportunities to read a range of texts and media. You have invested in a commercial reading scheme that is motivating pupils to read. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that they are now reading more in school and at home. However, pupils do not have enough opportunities to write for different purposes and audiences. As a consequence, pupils are not doing as well as they should in writing.

You predict that approximately 52% of pupils who took GCSE examinations this year will achieve five or more GCSE grades at A* to C, including in English and mathematics. This is a significant improvement on last year. You also expect an increased number of pupils to have made the progress expected of them in English and mathematics, which you anticipate will be in line with national figures.

External support

You and other members of staff told inspectors that the academy's sponsor, Ark Schools, continues to provide effective support to you, leaders, governors and staff. Inspectors agree. For example, the historic staffing and recruitment issues have been largely resolved with support from the Ark Schools' human resources team. In addition, the school's single central record (the record of the checks made on staff's suitability to work with children) is frequently checked by Ark Schools' central safeguarding team. As a result, the single central record meets requirements.

The Ark Schools' central education team provides effective training for new and existing governors. Governors say that the training helps them to understand and carry out their roles and responsibilities. The chair of the governing body has opportunities to work with the chairs of the other 34 Ark academies' local governing bodies through the 'Chairs' Forum'. The performance of the local governing body is regularly monitored and evaluated by the trust. Appropriate support and guidance are then provided where necessary.

The trust carries out half-termly monitoring visits to judge the school's progress. The findings of these visits are used to identify and put in place the necessary support to make sure improvements are maintained. The Ark Schools' network leads provide support and training for staff and individual subjects. One member of staff spoke for many when they said that the quality of training is 'fantastic'. The level of support from the network leads has recently been reduced, showing the trust's growing confidence in the ability of Ark Boulton Academy's leaders to maintain improvements.

Further support for the school is provided through the Ark Birmingham Hub (other Ark secondary academies in Birmingham). For example, Ark Boulton Academy has worked with Ark Kings to improve pupils' behaviour and to provide alternative provision for pupils with the most challenging behaviour.