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Mr Sajid Gulzar
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Dear Mr Gulzar

Special measures monitoring inspection of Birchfield Community School

Following my visit with Paul Whitcombe, Ofsted Inspector to your school on 6–7 March 2018, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in June 2017.

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 local authority’s statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school’s improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board (IEB), the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ann Pritchard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in June 2017.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - improving the skills and knowledge of leaders at all levels, including governors, to bring about the improvement needed
 - making robust checks on teaching and providing clear guidance to teachers on how to improve pupils' learning in lessons
 - providing middle leaders with the skills they need to effectively monitor their subjects areas
 - ensuring that the curriculum is broad and balanced and meets the needs of all pupils
 - ensuring that governors have the skills to monitor how the school is spending the pupil premium funding
 - ensuring that leaders provide accurate reports to governors about the school's performance, particularly in relation to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils.
- Improve outcomes for all pupils and the quality of teaching by ensuring that teachers:
 - use assessment information in lessons to identify and address pupils' misunderstandings
 - challenge the most able pupils and move their learning on at a faster pace
 - plan lessons which better cater for the needs of pupils and build on their prior learning across all areas of the curriculum
 - have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve.
- Improve personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - improving attendance for all pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged
 - ensuring that pupils are aware of what they are learning and how they can improve their own work.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 6 to 7 March 2018

Evidence

The inspectors observed pupils' learning in English and mathematics lessons in key stages 1 and 2. Children's learning was also observed in the early years. The executive headteacher and deputy headteacher accompanied the lead inspector for some of the observations. The inspectors looked at pupils' work across a range of subjects in addition to English and mathematics, spoke to pupils about their learning and observed behaviour in lessons. The inspectors met formally with three groups of pupils and observed pupils' behaviour at breaktimes and lunchtimes.

Meetings were held with the executive headteacher, deputy headteacher and other school leaders, including those who are responsible for English, mathematics, safeguarding, the curriculum and attendance. Further meetings were held with two members of the IEB, a representative from the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) and two leaders from the Prince Albert Community Trust (PACT). Inspectors also spoke to parents and carers before school.

The inspectors evaluated a range of documents, including the school's analysis of current pupils' progress, information about disadvantaged pupils and the pupil premium, and attendance. Additional documentation, such as information about how teachers' performance is managed, the school's action plan and self-evaluation, and safeguarding information and policies, was evaluated.

Context

There have been significant changes in the school since the last inspection. An executive headteacher from PACT is leading the school, with the school set to become part of this multi-academy trust by the end of the academic year. The involvement of PACT was brokered by BEP. An IEB was established in December 2017 and is responsible for the governance of the school.

The school's leadership structure is currently under review, with the appointment of a head of school imminent. The reorganisation of the leadership structure is yet to be finalised. However, there is a clear, strategic plan in place to ensure that a stable structure is in place by the end of the academic year. A restructuring of non-teaching staff is also currently taking place. The Nursery provision is now fully integrated into the school, with staff employed by the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher made a rapid evaluation of every aspect of the school's performance. This evaluation is both accurate and incisive. He then acted swiftly to stem the decline in the school's performance. He is tackling areas for improvement

strategically, ensuring that the weakest areas of the school's performance are prioritised and addressed as a matter of urgency. Rightly, since the last inspection, the executive headteacher has placed a strong focus on supporting and developing a culture of trust and teamwork across the school. As a result, staff morale across the school is improving significantly.

Teachers receive specifically targeted support to help them improve their practice. Highly effective professional development is provided from leaders within PACT, which is enabling improvements to be made in the quality of teaching and learning. This carefully structured approach to professional development means that staff feel supported. Consequently, the majority of staff are responding positively to the training opportunities provided by PACT. The executive headteacher has an accurate and precise understanding of the quality of teaching and learning. He has identified where teaching has improved, but also recognises that some weak teaching still persists across the school. While the training and support have enabled some teaching to improve, the majority of teaching is not yet helping pupils to make sufficient progress across all areas of the curriculum.

Teachers have specific development points in their appraisal targets, which are reviewed in 'accountability conversations'. This means that all teachers now understand their responsibilities and the standards they must achieve within their teaching and learning and leadership roles. Leaders ensure that the monitoring of teaching is regular and focused sharply on individual teachers' development points. Where needed, bespoke support plans are in place to help teachers to further improve their practice. However, the executive headteacher recognises that this monitoring is yet to show significant improvements, although some teaching is now enabling pupils to make better progress.

The executive headteacher implemented a whole-school review of the school's leadership and quickly evaluated the strengths and areas for improvement in this area. Highly experienced leaders from across PACT provide support for leaders within the school, which is helping them to develop their skills. However, this support is still at an early stage of development and, therefore, the full impact is yet to be seen.

Middle leaders have a sharper focus on monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in their subject areas. The mathematics and English leaders conduct regular learning walks and review pupils' work in books fortnightly. Strengths and areas for improvement are fed back to teachers. Where leaders identify significant areas of concern, additional support is provided to help teachers improve their teaching skills. However, leaders' feedback to teachers does not focus carefully enough on how to help teachers plan to meet pupils' learning needs. Work in pupils' books currently shows that the majority of pupils, especially in mathematics, receive the same work, regardless of ability. As a result, some pupils, especially the most able, do not make the progress they are capable of. This area is yet to be tackled by the leaders.

The executive headteacher identified that the previous approach to teaching subjects such as history, geography and science did not provide pupils with sufficient opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in these subjects. Therefore, a new approach to teaching the wider curriculum focuses on a more themed approach. For example, teaching topics such as 'the human body', 'our world' and 'the Tudors' means that pupils have a wider range of learning experiences.

Leaders recognise that teachers do not plan well enough to meet individual pupils' learning needs, especially for the most able pupils. As a result, work is too hard for some pupils and too easy for others. This is the case across all curriculum subjects, including English and mathematics. The majority of teachers have an over-reliance on the use of worksheets, which limits opportunities for pupils to work independently. In addition to this, the large majority of activities that teachers give to pupils do not enable them to develop their writing and mathematical skills adequately. Consequently, pupils do not make sufficient progress across the curriculum.

An IEB was established in late December 2017, with the first formal meeting of the IEB held in January 2018. The IEB is made up of governors who have a range of skills and expertise to provide effective challenge to leaders. The executive headteacher makes sure that the IEB has a detailed and accurate overview of the school's current performance. He ensures that the IEB is kept informed about the school improvements achieved, but also where significant issues remain. However, due to the limitations of the current assessment systems, reliable information about disadvantaged pupils' outcomes is yet to be provided.

Members of the IEB visit the school regularly to check that leaders' views of school performance are accurate. This includes conducting learning walks and reviewing documentation relating to the school's performance. Members of the IEB recognise that, while some improvements have been made in the school's performance, there is still some way to go to eradicate the weakest teaching within the school. The IEB also recognises that further work needs to be done to provide more reliable information about pupils' outcomes across the school. The IEB is ably providing the challenge that is necessary to hold the new leadership to account for the school's improvement. As the previous governing body was disbanded, a governance review has not taken place.

The pupil premium funding was previously used inappropriately to fund teaching assistants and cover teachers, with little or no focus on disadvantaged pupils. These financial issues were formally raised with the local authority by the IEB and executive headteacher. Some pupil premium funding has recently been spent to provide support for disadvantaged pupils who have additional complex needs. However, the pupil premium strategy and this targeted use of the funding have only recently been introduced. Therefore, the impact of this spending is unclear at this time.

There remains some unspent pupil premium funding. Due to the relatively recent formation of the IEB and appointment of the executive headteacher, there has not yet been time to develop a clear plan of how to spend this funding. Further discussions relating to the use of this funding are also taking place with the local authority. A pupil premium review has not taken place.

The school is set to become an academy by the end of the academic year as part of PACT. PACT is currently providing a range of support and professional development to the school. The executive headteacher and IEB have planned the transition to academy status exceptionally well.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The executive headteacher has an accurate understanding of the development needs of all teachers, especially in relation to the lack of effective use of assessment to plan for pupils' learning needs. Current assessment systems do not provide a clear picture of pupils' progress. This is because the majority of teachers are still at an early stage of developing their skills and understanding of the effective use of assessment. Whole-school systems are under review, with a new system to be introduced by the end of the year.

Some teachers consider what pupils should be learning in relation to their ages, and plan work which is matched appropriately to these ages in English and mathematics. These teachers monitor pupils' learning in lessons, and respond with appropriate challenge and support to help them make good progress in their learning.

However, this is not the case in the majority of year groups. Too many teachers do not use what they know about what pupils can do to plan work which takes their learning forward. In addition to this, when pupils show that they have understood and achieved an activity during a lesson, teachers do not respond to this learning. This means that pupils either sit patiently and wait for the next task or complete more of the same work. Where pupils show that they do not understand a task, they are not given sufficient support to help them. On occasion, these pupils are just given work to copy out. Consequently, pupils are not sufficiently challenged or supported to make the progress they should.

Where teachers have high expectations of what pupils can do, interesting and challenging work is provided which enthuses pupils. For example, pupils in a Year 5 class learned about healthy eating. The teacher used challenging questions to deepen pupils' learning about this subject, such as asking pupils to explain why a nutritious diet is good for you. This teaching built on their previous learning, including the use of technical vocabulary to describe diets.

However, there are limited examples of teachers having sufficiently high expectations of what pupils can do. This is especially so for the most able pupils.

Often, pupils are given work which is too easy. In almost all lessons, the majority of teachers provide activities on printed sheets. These printed activities are generally of a low quality and, in some cases, are difficult to read. They do not give pupils opportunities to develop their independent learning skills. In English, writing is limited by the amount of room on the sheets and, on many occasions, the narrowness of the lines. In mathematics, the sheets only require pupils to answer a few questions. This means that pupils' learning in lessons and over time is not developed quickly enough.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

A strategic approach to the monitoring of attendance is not in place. Leaders do not have a detailed whole-school overview of attendance patterns. Absence rates are monitored, and staff work with external agencies to review the attendance of individual pupils. In these cases, support is provided to families where significant issues with attendance arise. However, there is currently no coordinated approach to tackling the continuing attendance issues. In addition to this, families who do not ensure that their children attend school regularly for no good reason are not challenged effectively. Consequently, attendance rates continue to be below national rates. Attendance rates for disadvantaged pupils are also below national rates. However, attendance rates for disadvantaged pupils are similar to other pupils within the school.

Pupils say that they have good relationships with their teachers and other staff within the school. They feel safe in school and say that staff support them when needed. Pupils also say that behaviour is very good and scored it as 'nine out of 10'. They explained during the inspection that behaviour is good 'because we listen to our teachers'. Pupils' behaviour throughout the inspection was delightful. No lessons were disrupted by inappropriate behaviour and very positive relationships between pupils were evident during social times. Pupils also speak highly of the range of extra-curricular activities they can take part in, such as computer club, dodgeball and the orchestra.

However, pupils believe that they are not sufficiently challenged, saying that 'sometimes work is too easy.' This was also evident in the lesson observations and through the work in pupils' books. Pupils are unclear about how to improve their work. This is because teachers do not provide feedback which helps pupils to understand what they have done wrong and how to correct it. The lack of challenge provided for the most able pupils means that they rarely get the opportunity to demonstrate what they are truly capable of.

Outcomes for pupils

The school's current assessment system does not provide reliable information about pupils' progress or attainment. Teachers do not accurately assess and record pupils' achievements in reading, writing and mathematics. A new assessment system has

recently been introduced but teachers are still developing their understanding of how to use this system. Leaders from PACT are helping teachers to check if their assessments accurately reflect pupils' attainment. In addition to this, reading and mathematics tests are also used to help establish what pupils are able to do. Consequently, there is currently no clear overview of pupils' attainment and progress in reading, writing or mathematics.

Work in pupils' books currently shows that pupils across the school are not making sufficient progress in reading, writing and mathematics. This is especially so for the most able pupils, who are not given work which challenges them.

In 2017, pupils at the end of key stage 2 made progress broadly in line with other pupils nationally in reading and writing. Progress in mathematics was above the national average. At the end of key stage 1 in 2017, the proportion of pupils who achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics was broadly in line with the national average. However, the proportion of pupils who achieved a greater depth in their learning was below the national average in all of these subjects.

The proportion of pupils achieving the required standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1 in 2017 rose and was in line with the national average. At the end of the Reception Year, the proportion of children who achieved a good level of development was below the national average.

External support

BEP, on behalf of the local authority, brokered the support of PACT and the executive headteacher. In addition to this, BEP provided support to establish the IEB. The IEB, executive headteacher and leaders from PACT provide highly effective support and challenge to the school. As a result, some improvements in the school's performance have begun. All leaders know precisely what further actions need to take place, and have a carefully structured school improvement plan to enable the school improvement journey to continue.

Priority for further improvement:

- Ensure that teachers give pupils opportunities to develop independent learning, especially in writing and mathematics.