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Mr Peter Baker
Mount Grace School
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Dear Mr Baker

Special measures monitoring inspection of Mount Grace School

Following my visit with Phillip Barr, Ofsted Inspector to your academy on 02-03 May 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 academy'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 January 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 academy's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The academy's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - creating more robust development plans, which have clear milestones so that leaders and governors can measure their impact rigorously and routinely
 - sharpening monitoring systems so that they take greater account of the progress that pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, make when evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and assessment
 - training governors so that they are better equipped to challenge leaders over the quality of provision in the school
 - ensuring that leaders and governors routinely evaluate the impact of pupil premium expenditure to better link spending to activities that improve the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, including for the most able disadvantaged pupils
 - supporting middle leaders to strengthen the quality of teaching, learning and achievement in their respective areas.
- Raise achievement by:
 - accelerating the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities so that they attain higher grades by the time that they reach Year 11
 - urgently improving the quality of provision in mathematics and science, so that pupils make better progress from their various starting points.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in key stages 3 and 4 and in the sixth form by:
 - ensuring that staff use their understanding of what pupils already know and can do to plan activities which challenge the most able and support the least able to make good progress
 - ensuring that teachers have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve in lessons and over time
 - sharing effective assessment practice, particularly in giving feedback to pupils, so that pupils understand what they need to do to improve their work and further their learning.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 02 May 2018 to 03 May 2018

Evidence

We observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you and other senior and middle leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, two groups of pupils, three members of the governing body and the school's improvement partner. Together with you, we observed pupils at work in lessons. We also scrutinised a sample of pupils' work in science and mathematics.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have reorganised your team of senior leaders and made changes to individuals' roles and responsibilities both at middle- and senior-leader level. Some leaders have been appointed quite recently. You have also broadened the senior team by including faculty leaders; in addition, your appointment of 'lead teachers' has added further capacity to lead improvements to teaching, learning and assessment. There have been a number of staffing changes, particularly in science and mathematics. In these subjects, you have been able to make permanent appointments, so some temporary teachers have left the school.

The governing body wishes the school to join a multi-academy trust and is involved in ongoing discussions with the regional schools commissioner about this.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Together with governors, you and your senior team are taking determined action to address those aspects of the school's work that have needed to improve. You have used independent, external reviews of behaviour, attendance and leadership at the school to inform your improvement planning appropriately. All staff are clear about what they need to do to fulfil the plan's objectives, and are receiving well-targeted support to enable them to do so. Governors are tracking progress towards the plans carefully.

You have improved the systems that enable leaders to monitor the progress that pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, make. Leaders are examining all of the information they have about these pupils' individual circumstances as well as trends in their attendance, behaviour and progress. You are ensuring this information is being used to identify the barriers preventing pupils from learning well, so that these can be removed. Disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities often benefit from effective additional support provided in the classroom by teaching assistants. You are providing disadvantaged pupils with access to additional resources, such as revision packs, to support their learning. Leaders have also made changes to the timetable so that these pupils benefit from the strongest teaching. Most teachers are using

questioning and other techniques to check disadvantaged pupils' understanding during lessons. Teachers are typically marking these pupils' work first, according to your policy. These strategies are helping teachers to identify those who need extra help before they fall behind.

Subject leaders are checking the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities carefully and arranging additional support for those who need it. Senior leaders are checking the impact of this work by their regular observation of pupils' classroom learning and work in their books. Together with governors, leaders are using this information, alongside national research evidence and the outcomes of the pupil premium review, to evaluate the impact of pupil premium spending and determine what is making the biggest difference. The school's management information indicates that, typically, these pupils are making accelerated progress, but that significant gaps in some pupils' knowledge and understanding remain because of previous poor teaching. This is particularly the case in science.

You and your senior leaders are working effectively with subject leaders to evaluate standards accurately in their respective areas. Through regular observation of teaching, scrutiny of pupils' work and checks on their progress, you are building a clear picture of which aspects of teaching are strong and which need to improve. Through careful financial management, you have been able to increase the school's capacity to train and support teachers; your recently appointed 'lead teachers' are helping others to improve aspects of their work. Your most effective subject leaders are providing support to those who are leading subjects in which improvement is needed. A number of teachers, including those in mathematics and English, have trained as examiners and are sharing this expertise with their colleagues. Teachers are positive about the impact of these and other sources of support and about how precisely targeted it is. In some subject areas, a number of teachers have only recently joined the school, so have had limited opportunity to benefit from these kinds of support and training. In addition, some leaders, including the leader coordinating provision for disadvantaged pupils and the subject leader for mathematics, have only taken up their positions relatively recently. This means that the full impact of their work is not yet evident.

Governors have responded to the recommendations of an external review of the way in which they work. They gain independent sources of information about the school's work by commissioning external reviews and through discussions with the school's improvement adviser. Governors have engaged in relevant training and have increased the frequency and the rigour with which they challenge senior leaders about standards at the school. A particular focus is the progress being made by disadvantaged pupils across different subjects. Governors also make regular checks on pupils' rates of attendance and the incidence of serious misbehaviour and temporary exclusion, and they have a secure understanding of the improvements being made in these respects. Their understanding of trends in respect of less serious misbehaviour, such as disruption to learning, is less clear.

Governors are making careful and diligent preparations so that the school can join a multi-academy trust. Engaging in this work is not diminishing governors' capacity to secure improvements at the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving but it remains uneven. It is strongest in English and in the sixth form. You have set out clearly your expectations of teachers and the procedures they need to follow to plan learning. There are signs of growing consistency. All teachers have seating plans that identify the different needs and backgrounds of pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. Typically, teachers are following the school's policy and preparing a wide range of activities so that pupils of different levels of ability can work at the appropriate level. Many teachers guide pupils towards the most appropriately challenging tasks; most pupils respond well and make gains in their learning. Too often, however, pupils are not challenged when they choose a task that is too easy or too difficult for them. This limits the progress that some make. At times, pupils who get stuck or who finish their task early, engage in discussions unrelated to work and distract others.

Teachers usually follow the school's policy and make sure that they ask disadvantaged pupils questions, so that they engage them in learning and gain a secure sense of what they do and do not know and understand. However, some teachers target questioning at only a small number of pupils, or ask questions of the class as a whole. When this happens, many pupils do not engage in classroom discussion. As a result, teachers sometimes move pupils on without knowing how secure their knowledge is, especially when they are not using other means to ascertain it. Some teachers are adept at using questioning to challenge pupils to think more deeply and to stimulate high-level discussion and debate. You are ensuring that teachers share these strategies with others, but although they are a regular feature of teaching in the sixth form, this is less often the case in key stages 3 and 4.

You have made it a priority for teachers to offer pupils regular, subject-specific feedback that shows them what they need to do in order to improve their work. Almost all teachers offer such feedback, and you are taking robust action when your monitoring indicates that it is not happening. In such cases, pupils often continue to make the same mistakes, or do not develop their answers or their thinking as fully as they might.

Until recently, staffing in science and mathematics has been unstable. You have reduced the school's reliance on temporary teachers in these subjects because you have recruited permanent staff. Leaders in these subjects are prioritising improvements appropriately. In science, for example, leaders have ensured that all teachers are working to long-term plans, so that new teachers can quickly match

what they teach to pupils' learning needs. Your management information indicates that the teaching in both subjects is stronger than at the time of the previous inspection and that, overall, pupils are making better progress than in the past. Inspection evidence confirms this. However, because of a legacy of previously weak teaching, gaps in many older pupils' knowledge and understanding remain. Leaders have focused on ensuring that these pupils are well prepared for their forthcoming examinations. This has limited their ability to pursue other necessary changes and to focus on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment at key stage 3.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

You have made significant progress in reducing the proportion of pupils who have been temporarily excluded from school or placed in internal isolation, over the past year. This is true both overall and for key groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. You have done much to improve the consistency with which teachers respond to, and record and report, poor behaviour. Much of the time, pupils behave well and work hard. However, pupils feel that staff are undermined by a minority of teachers who do not apply rewards and sanctions consistently. Your own records, and the views of pupils, suggest that more needs to be done to eradicate fully some misbehaviour in lessons. A small number of pupils' behaviour is poor and, because of this, teachers and pupils are too often distracted from the task of teaching or learning. This slows the pace of learning in too many lessons, particularly in key stage 4. Your records indicate that too often these pupils do not respond to sanctions, rewards and support by changing the way that they behave.

You have made clear to pupils that the use of inappropriate language is unacceptable and why this is so; your records indicate that teachers respond robustly when they hear it being used. However, pupils told us that they still hear such language often, particularly when adults are not within earshot. They made clear that they almost never hear racist or homophobic comments, however, and that they feel safe at school. They think that bullying is rare, and that usually teachers and other adults deal with it both robustly and effectively when it does occur.

You have responded to recommendations made by the external review of attendance and by the school's external improvement partner. Your attendance officer has led improvements, working effectively with senior and other leaders. Procedures for checking attendance and following up absence are rigorous; the register is taken at the start of every lesson, and pupils know that there will be swift action if they fail to attend a lesson despite being in school. As a result, truancy from lessons has almost been eradicated. Leaders ensure that prompt action is taken when an individual's attendance begins to slip, and they are working well to help parents and carers understand the impact of poor attendance on their children's progress. Overall attendance is now in line with the national average.

Attendance in the sixth form is now high, and students typically attend school and their lessons punctually. Overall, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is declining, including those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, and those attending alternative provision. The rate of disadvantaged pupils' persistent absence, though falling, remains above the national average.

In the sixth form, leaders are promoting students' personal development well and helping to prepare them for the next stage of their education, employment or training. Leaders have tightened arrangements regarding the way in which students use their 'private study' time at school. Students are using this time productively, which, together with improvements in teaching, is helping to accelerate their rate of progress. Leaders are ensuring that students complete work experience and work-related learning that is a good match for their ambitions, interests and intended future studies or careers through eight different 'pathways'. Students told inspectors that they appreciate the high-quality advice they receive before applying to university, or seeking an apprenticeship or other form of training. Leaders are tracking students' destinations carefully, and are using this information to help judge the effectiveness of their work.

Outcomes for pupils

Overall, pupils made better progress and achieved more highly in their GCSE examinations in 2017 than in 2016. They achieved particularly highly in English. Pupils made insufficient progress in science, mathematics and history. Disadvantaged pupils' progress was low overall. In the sixth form, the gap between pupils' progress and that of others nationally with the same starting points narrowed because pupils' attendance has increased and because teaching has improved. The school's records indicate that most current sixth-form students are making the progress that they should, given their individual starting points.

At key stages 3 and 4, pupils' progress is accelerating, but inconsistent teaching means that it varies between, and sometimes within, different subjects. Interventions to support pupils' learning in science and mathematics are under way, and disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities in particular are benefiting from small-group tuition. You and your leaders are using their monitoring information to determine where progress is not rapid enough, and are ensuring that pupils in those classes are taught by the school's most effective teachers, wherever possible. Increasing the overall progress made by pupils, especially in science and mathematics, remains a top priority for the school.

External support

You and your leaders have made use of external subject experts to support improvements in a number of subjects, including science and mathematics. The recommendations made by a number of independent reviews, commissioned by the governing body, have been implemented, which has helped to bring about

improvements in attendance, behaviour and the quality of leadership. The school's improvement partner visits regularly, providing advice and guidance, and helping to validate leaders' judgements about the effectiveness of the school's work.