

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Rowena Hillier
Principal
Staffordshire University Academy
Marston Road
Hednesford
Cannock
Staffordshire
WS12 4JH

Dear Mrs Hillier

Special measures monitoring inspection of Staffordshire University Academy

Following my visit with Julie Griffiths, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 10 to 11 October 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 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 April 2017. 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.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local academy council, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Simon Mosley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve outcomes for pupils, especially lower-ability disadvantaged pupils in key stages 3 and 4, by:
 - ensuring that whole-school planning is sharply focused on effective strategies for improving the learning and progress of all pupils
 - ensuring that staff have a clear understanding of what pupils can achieve and an accurate understanding of pupils' starting points
 - addressing, as a matter of urgency, the underachievement of lower-ability pupils in both key stages 3 and 4 so that there is no repeat of the poor examination results at GCSE and A level.
- Improve quality of teaching in key stages 3 and 4 by ensuring that:
 - teachers have well-informed expectations of all pupils and do not settle for poorly presented, incomplete or superficial work in their books
 - pupils of all abilities know what they need to do to improve their work and make progress
 - learning is appropriately challenging and that slow progress and low standards of work from disadvantaged pupils are not accepted.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - improving the attendance of all vulnerable pupils so they do not miss learning time
 - ensuring that behaviour in lessons is good
 - improving the ways in which all pupils show respect for each other and their teachers.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by:
 - developing relationships with external partners and agencies that provide objective and accurate evaluations of standards in the school
 - improving staff training and professional development
 - ensuring that all middle leaders have a clear understanding of how pupils make progress from their different starting points
 - ensuring that all leaders have a clear understanding of assessment
 - ensuring that governors have an accurate understanding of the school's performance so they can take urgent and effective action to remedy weaknesses

- making sure the curriculum is fit for purpose and offers pupils appropriate courses that add value to their learning including in humanities, languages and creative subjects
- making sure that leaders review the impact of their choices for courses that whole year groups are required to take, to ensure that these courses help pupils in future education, employment or training.
- Improve the effectiveness of 16 to 19 programmes of study by:
 - making sure that all students following A-level courses achieve grades that reflect their abilities
 - improving the teaching of A-level courses so that academic rigour is more consistent and the highest grades are achieved.

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

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10 to 11 October 2018

Evidence

Inspectors assessed the impact of leaders' actions taken since the last monitoring inspection.

Meetings were held with the principal, the vice-principal, other leaders and staff. The lead inspector met with four members of the local academy council (LAC), including the chair and the vice-chair, and the chief executive officer of the trust. He also had a telephone conversation with two consultants commissioned by the trust to provide support.

Inspectors made short visits, with senior leaders, to a range of lessons in every key stage. Inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke to pupils formally and informally. They also observed behaviour in lessons and during social time.

Various school documents were scrutinised, including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans and minutes of meetings of the LAC and the board of trustees. Information about safeguarding and pupils' progress, behaviour, attendance and welfare were also analysed.

The opinions of parents were considered through 130 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the extended senior leadership team has been reshaped to include the principal, a vice-principal, two assistant principals and six directors of teaching and learning. A vice-principal and two assistant principals have left the school and a director of teaching and learning has been seconded to the role of assistant principal. New directors of humanities and science began working at the school in September 2018, and the head of faculty for creative subjects has been promoted to director of creative. A member of the English faculty has been seconded to the role of director of English and the new head of Year 8 has been internally promoted.

A new teacher in charge within science and a Spanish teacher have been appointed, along with a full-time and a part-time teacher of mathematics. A lead practitioner of mathematics also joined in September 2018 but has since left the school. A newly qualified teacher of drama joined the school at the start of the academic year and four members of support staff and three apprentice teaching assistants began working at the school at the same time. A cover supervisor has been seconded to the role of school librarian.

The head of English, the head of science, a leader in English, a leader in mathematics and two teachers of mathematics left the school in August 2018. One teacher is currently on maternity leave.

In September 2018, a new chair and vice-chair of the LAC were appointed. The previous chair and vice-chair are no longer members of the LAC. The former chair of the LAC has remained on the trust board.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders and managers have a thorough understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They are using this knowledge to inform effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's development plan addresses the school's priorities by outlining carefully-thought-out strategies to improve the quality of education provided. The plan builds on the trust's statement of action, which was judged to be fit for purpose at the time of the last monitoring inspection.

Leaders now evaluate the impact of their actions more systematically and refine plans accordingly. However, as many developments are relatively new, they are yet to have a full impact.

The principal and vice-principal have high expectations and they have raised aspirations of staff and pupils. They have developed a more positive culture in the school. Staff understand what still needs to be done and are working well together for the benefit of the pupils.

The extended senior leadership team is having a positive impact on school improvement. Directors are taking action to improve the provision and outcomes in their areas of responsibility and they are influencing whole-school developments. They coach and challenge middle leaders, but subject and pastoral leadership are not consistently strong. Senior leaders have correctly identified developing middle leadership as an area for development.

Staff value the training that they receive, and many are taking more responsibility for their own professional development. Leaders regularly give instant feedback to staff about what they are doing well and points to consider for improvement. This encourages staff to reflect on how to develop their practice further.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and provides pupils with wider opportunities to study creative subjects than it did in the past. It focuses on allowing pupils to acquire academic knowledge and skills over time while also promoting personal development. However, as the current model is relatively new and as there was poor teaching in the past, the curriculum has not led to good outcomes in external examinations.

Leaders have ensured that the coordination and collaboration between the pastoral team, Chase View Support Centre and staff who support pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities is beginning to improve. Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities do very well in Year 7. However, the impact of the provision for this group of pupils has been variable over time. Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make slower progress, attend less frequently and are excluded more often than the national averages.

Year 7 catch-up funding was used well to help targeted pupils improve their knowledge and skills in English. However, it had a limited impact in mathematics last year. Consequently, leaders have amended the strategies used to help pupils improve their mathematical knowledge and skills.

Last year, pupil premium funding was used for a range of interventions to broaden experiences and improve disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. As a result, targeted pupils took part in trips and visits. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils improved, fewer were regularly absent and incidents of inappropriate behaviour declined. The attainment of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 in English and mathematics moved closer to that of other pupils nationally. However, as a result of poor results in science and humanities in particular, the differences in attainment widened between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. Despite improvements, disadvantaged pupils are still absent and excluded more often than other pupils.

There is a strong safeguarding culture in the school and this aspect of the school's work continues to be well led. Staff are well trained, and they are kept up to date. Pupils are taught to stay safe and the vast majority of parents who responded to Parent View believe that their children feel safe in school.

Staff and governors continue to work well with parents. Communication is good, and leaders use meetings, social media, the school's website and newsletters to keep parents informed of developments. The recent parents' forum was well attended and most parents who made their views known during the inspection would recommend the school to another parent.

Governance has continued to improve. Members of the LAC have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and hold leaders to close account. They focus on the impact of actions, ask challenging questions, request additional information and follow up matters. They focus on the school's priorities.

Staffordshire University Academy Trust has continued to provide effective support and challenge to school leaders. The trust provides a range of services, commissions good-quality external support and facilitates staff development. The chief executive officer uses his knowledge, skills and experience to mentor leaders and hold them to close account.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is improving as a culture of higher expectations is emerging. Teachers have a clearer understanding of what pupils can achieve and there is some strong practice in English and creative and vocational subjects in particular.

Pupils usually behave well in class and show respect for staff and other pupils. In some lessons they are given the opportunities to develop the characteristics of confident learners by tackling problems independently, working well with other pupils and displaying resilience when they encounter difficult tasks. At times, though, when the activities are less engaging, pupils sit quietly and do little.

Inconsistencies remain as the strategies that leaders have introduced to improve teaching are not yet embedded throughout the school. When teaching has less impact, expectations are not high enough. Staff have not planned to meet the needs of pupils with different starting points. The most able pupils are not challenged to make strong progress, questions are not used well to check understanding, teaching assistants are not well deployed and learning is not moved on at the appropriate pace. Too often, teachers focus on the task rather than the learning that they want to take place.

As staff do not use the school's marking policy consistently well, the quality of feedback that pupils receive is variable. However, there is strong practice in English and pupils are now being given more opportunities to write at length in different subjects. Pupils have more pride in their work and presentation is improving.

As a result of many staff not forecasting grades accurately, leaders have correctly identified improving the accuracy of assessment information as an area for development. They are beginning to address this but, once again, it is too early to assess the impact of their actions. This will be looked at during the next monitoring visit.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour has continued to improve. After consultation with staff and pupils, the 'RESPECT' code has been revised to incorporate 'support one another' and the behaviour management system has been redeveloped. Staff now manage behaviour more effectively and pupils are taking more responsibility for their actions. 'Team SUA' is starting to embed.

The school is calm and orderly during social time and less learning time is lost now as a result of disruption. The number of instances of inappropriate behaviour has reduced and the number of fixed-term exclusions has declined slightly. However, a higher proportion of pupils are excluded than average and too many pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils are excluded.

There have been very few incidents of bullying recorded since the last inspection and pupils say that bullying is rare. They have been taught about the impact of bullying and know how to report concerns. Pupils are confident that staff would follow up any issues that they raised.

The importance of regular attendance has a higher profile and the attendance intervention manager is having a positive impact through her work with families. Attendance has remained just above the national average and persistent absence has declined. However, girls have lower attendance than boys. The attendance of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities has declined and is now lower than that of others and disadvantaged pupils are still absent too often.

The pastoral system has been strengthened and the role of the form tutor has been enhanced. Staff are now taking more responsibility for following up issues related to attendance, behaviour and personal development. However, the 'form tutor first' approach is not yet fully embedded.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are promoted well at alternative provision. Good communication and robust systems ensure that pupils are safe when they attend Cannock Chase Skills and the Innovation Hub. The provision is helping to re-engage many of the pupils in their education. All have better attendance at the hub than in school and most have improved their attendance at school since starting their placement.

The quality of careers education has improved and contributed to all of last year's Year 11 pupils moving onto appropriate destinations.

Outcomes for pupils

Some individual pupils did very well in last summer's external examinations. English outcomes improved and results in mathematics improved slightly. Consequently, greater proportions of pupils gained standard, strong or high passes in both English and mathematics than in 2017.

Low-prior-attaining pupils made faster progress than the national average and pupils did well in sport, business, catering and product design. However, overall progress and attainment declined in 2018.

Middle-prior-attaining pupils and the most able pupils made slower progress than they should have done, and disadvantaged pupils made slower progress and attained less well than other pupils. The progress of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities also declined and was slower than that of other pupils with similar starting points.

Outcomes were poor in science, history and geography. Few pupils studied a modern foreign language at GCSE level and outcomes in mathematics did not match those in English. Forecast grades from staff were largely inaccurate.

The school's most recent collection of information about how pupils are achieving indicates that they continue to better in English than in mathematics. It also suggests that the most able pupils, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are still not making enough progress. The information indicates that progress is improving overall but senior leaders are not confident that it is reliable.

16 to 19 study programmes

Post-16 outcomes declined last year. Students did not make sufficient progress and no student achieved three higher-grade passes at A level.

As pointed out at the time of the last full inspection, teaching in the sixth form needs to improve so academic rigour is more consistent, and the highest grades are achieved. Expectations are still not high enough and the most able students are not consistently challenged to make strong progress.

Students have not been well prepared for the demands of A level in key stage 4. Some lack the background knowledge and skills that they need to excel in the sixth form. Teachers do not consistently plan to address gaps in pupils' understanding through appropriate activities. As quality assurance processes and staff training are not as well developed as elsewhere, the sixth form is not improving in line with the rest of the school.

Despite this, there is some high-quality teaching in the sixth form and the wider curriculum offer is good. Students benefit from completing the extended project, participating in tailored work experience, studying for first aid and safeguarding qualifications and undertaking a range of key experiences to help to prepare them for adult life. All last year's leavers moved onto appropriate destinations, including a wide range of university courses, employment and training.

External support

The trust has commissioned high-quality support and challenge from external consultants. By focusing on leadership development, improvement planning, the use of performance information and the school's priorities, they are helping leaders improve the school. The consultants are also supporting developments in science and providing challenge over the use of pupil premium funding.

School leaders are also accessing tailored support from other schools. This is primarily focused upon improving practice and outcomes in mathematics and science. It is too early to assess its impact.