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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



31 October 2018

Mr Richard Browne
Headteacher
E-Act Pathways Academy
Raisen Hall Road
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S5 7NA

Dear Mr Browne

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to E-Act Pathways Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 17 October 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in June 2017, the academy was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and trust partners are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the academy to become good.

The academy should take further action to:

- sharpen improvement and action plans, evaluating more meticulously the extent to which additional funding is making a difference for disadvantaged pupils
- ensure that children in the early years make more rapid progress towards the early learning goals in reading, writing and number
- challenge and support all middle leaders to take increased responsibility for

improving children's progress and development in the early years

- tackle inconsistencies in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across key stages, rigorously, in order to raise pupils' outcomes in mathematics and the wider curriculum, rapidly
- develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of high-quality teaching and learning in phonics and early reading among all teaching staff, ensuring that pupils read books at home and in school that are well matched to their needs
- reduce the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior and middle leaders, multi-academy trust executive officers, including the regional education director, system leaders and members of the local governing body. I also met with pupils and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. School improvement and action plans were evaluated alongside pupil premium spending plans. You and I observed teaching and learning in each key stage together. A wide range of documentation was scrutinised, including assessment, attendance and safeguarding information. I examined pupils' work on display and in books.

Context

Following a period of significant turbulence, there has been considerable change in staffing since the previous inspection. There have been three different headteachers within an 18-month period. You as the current headteacher, the primary system leader and the regional education director have each been appointed since the previous inspection. Several middle and phase leaders are new to post, including the leaders for English, mathematics, reading, early years and science. Some members of the teaching staff have left, and others have been appointed. Four newly qualified teachers were appointed in September 2018.

Main findings

Significant instability in staffing has been a barrier to improvement since the previous inspection. The extent to which the recommendations made at the previous inspection have been addressed has been hampered by short-term leadership. It has taken longer than anticipated to recruit and appoint suitable leaders and staff. However, there is now a stable staff population and your actions are beginning to make a positive difference. Parents are pleased by this much-needed stability and feel reassured that their children are safe in the caring hands of staff who know them well.

Since taking up the post of headteacher in January 2018, you have worked

diligently to tackle the challenges facing the school since the previous inspection. Current leaders are aspirational for pupils and the school. Collectively, you bring a wealth of educational expertise and skills to bear on your respective roles. Your recently formed senior leadership team is clear about what needs to be done to improve the school's overall performance and to raise pupils' outcomes. Trust partners, although initially slow to stabilise the vulnerable position that the school found itself in, offer apt and frequent support and challenge. Together, you are resolute in uniting and galvanising staff to make a positive difference for all pupils.

Although the pace of improvement now needs to quicken, several well-placed actions are already bearing fruit. You have embedded a warm, positive ethos where parents, carers, pupils and staff feel valued and welcome. The calm environment has been augmented by the addition of a library, a redeveloped, canopied courtyard and a revamped outdoor play area in the early years. New reading and mathematics materials, as well as specialist staff for modern foreign languages, music and art, are enriching pupils' daily experiences. Pupils' work is attractively displayed, emphasising that their work and efforts are valued. Pupils' conduct in and around school is good; they are polite to staff, visitors and each other.

As a result of your work with staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning, some success is evident. Pupils' pride in the presentation of their work in books is improving apace. Provisional assessment information shows that the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the combined reading, writing and mathematics element in key stage 2 increased in 2018 from previous years. More pupils leaving Year 6 were better prepared for the key stage 3 curriculum.

Nonetheless, the proportion of pupils working at age-related expectations in reading, writing and mathematics in each key stage remains well below the national averages. Additional and sustained action is needed to ensure that all pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils, fare much better across each year group in the future.

The correct priorities are identified appropriately in leaders' post-Ofsted action plan and in your current school improvement plans. Nonetheless, the quality of planning needs sharpening. For example, while plans describe how additional funding is being used, the effect that it is having on disadvantaged pupils across each key stage is not evaluated precisely enough. A lack of detail means that it is not always clear what is being done, by whom and when, to support and challenge teaching staff to improve their practices across subjects. Plans have too little emphasis on developing all teachers' and teaching assistants' expertise and practices in phonics and early reading.

You have wasted no time in raising teachers' expectations of what children can do and achieve. You have absolute determination that pupils' progress and outcomes can and will improve, rapidly. For example, despite the early years being graded good in the previous inspection, you have correctly identified some weaknesses in

provision and practice. You tackled key issues swiftly. As a result, the learning environment is enticing. The outdoor area is attractively resourced and indoor areas for learning have been restructured. Staff have had professional development opportunities to improve their practices. Such changes are beginning to make a positive difference to children's learning and progress.

The quality of teaching and learning across key stages, however, remains too variable. In the early years, children are not making the rapid progress from their different starting points that you expect. This is especially the case in reading, writing and number. Subject leaders have too little opportunity to shape and improve teaching and learning in this key phase. They have limited involvement with Nursery and Reception children and are not held fully responsible for children's progress. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development over time has remained below national averages. Not all children are effectively prepared for Year 1 and the demands of the key stage 1 curriculum. Leaders are now working with local trust partners and other schools to further improve the early years. It is too soon to see the effect of these efforts on children's progress and attainment.

You have tackled the challenge set for you at the previous inspection regarding pupils' reading with appropriate intent. Action plans for English, reading and phonics spell out clearly leaders' intentions for improvement. Some success is apparent. Professional development opportunities have successfully improved the skills of some staff. Leaders have raised the profile of reading, offering incentives to inspire pupils and workshops to involve parents. Staff read aloud to pupils daily and the reading lists introduced for each year group make sure that pupils experience a breadth of different texts. You have invested heavily in new reading books and materials. Pupils say that they like reading and enjoy the books on offer. Provisional results for key stage 2 in 2018 demonstrate substantial improvement in pupils' reading from previous years.

Nevertheless, due to prolonged, historical weaknesses in teaching and learning, pupils in each key stage have gaps in their knowledge and understanding of phonics and in their vocabulary. Leaders with responsibility for English, reading and phonics are not yet collaborating or coordinating their efforts as effectively as they might to offer a joined-up approach to reading progression from Nursery to Year 6. Pupils' progress in reading is further hampered as they move through school because not all staff are skilled in developing pupils' phonics and early reading skills. Not all pupils and children in the early years are reading books in school and/or at home that are well matched to their phonics knowledge and skills. Such issues are slowing the pace of improvement.

In mathematics, another key area for improvement identified at the previous inspection, some gains have been made. Extensive external support and professional development opportunities have honed leadership skills in this subject. Teaching staff are beginning to benefit from this as leaders undertake increasingly effective monitoring activities and tailor staff training sessions accordingly. New

mathematics materials are enhancing teaching and learning in classes across key stages. This said, the proportion of pupils in key stage 2 reaching the expected standard in mathematics remains well below national averages, despite a small improvement in the proportion of pupils reaching a greater depth of learning. Over time, disadvantaged pupils in particular are poorly prepared for the secondary mathematics curriculum. Leaders' evaluation of the effect of additional funding is not sufficiently meticulous. Children and staff in the early years do not yet have the benefit of working closely with mathematics leaders.

Safeguarding is taken seriously by all staff, including trust partners, who visit frequently. Recent changes to statutory guidance and advice are well understood. Pupils say that they feel safe and are well looked after due to the 'drastic changes' that you have made. They understand the different forms that bullying may take but are adamant that issues are rare and dealt with effectively by adults. Pupils appreciate enormously, 'how much the staff care', the secure entry and exit systems you have introduced and the personal and online safety discussions that they take part in regularly. They particularly enjoy the 'daily mile' opportunity you have afforded them, understanding the benefits of an active lifestyle to their physical and mental health and well-being.

You have restructured the pastoral team to meet the needs of pupils and families more efficiently. New initiatives are making a difference in terms of attendance. The 'walking bus', led by the pastoral leader and aided by the much-loved school dog, delights and engages children and families. Pupils' punctuality and their overall attendance continue to improve steadily. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school, however, remains high.

External support

You draw well on the extensive range of external support and guidance available via trust partners and the local authority. Trust partners acknowledge that they did not respond with sufficient urgency to issues identified by the previous inspections. Recent involvement has heightened, with increased rigour in monitoring the school's performance making a greater difference. The local authority is also more involved and representatives feel that there is a positive 'culture shift' within school. They are now working in close partnership with you and the trust. All parties are combining their efforts to broker support for leaders and staff with local primary schools, as well as schools within the trust more widely.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector