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Ross Trafford
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Dear Mr Trafford

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Gospel Oak School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 11 May 2023, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2022.

During the inspection, Stuart Clarkson, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) and I discussed with you, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the chair of trustees and another trustee, the chair of the local academy governing board, and other school and trust leaders the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also carried out visits to lessons, looked at documents related to safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and the curriculum, met with a group of staff and groups of pupils, observed pupils' arrival at and departure from school, observed break and lunchtimes, and talked to pupils and staff informally throughout the day. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Gospel Oak School remains inadequate and has serious weaknesses. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the category of concern to be removed.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Since the inspection in October, there have been changes to senior leadership. The former principal is now senior vice-principal and you have taken up the role as principal on an interim basis. A vice-principal and assistant principal have left. Currently there are some gaps in staffing, which you are working to fill ready for September. Appointments have been made to teaching and leadership posts. There is a new chair of the local academy governing board and two new members of this board.

During this inspection, we focused on the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection, related to behaviour, the management of behaviour, attendance, aspects of safeguarding and provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The evidence shows that since the previous inspection, you, well supported by the trust and by your senior leadership team, have taken decisive and well-chosen actions to start to improve the school. There is an appropriate sense of urgency to the changes being made. Staff are working well with you to implement these changes, and many pupils are responding well too. You have also, rightly, spent time listening to concerns that some families have about the school, and this work is also beginning to have an impact.

You have firmly and clearly set out your expectations of pupils' behaviour. Importantly, you and leaders have worked with all staff to ensure that they understand these expectations. This work has had a positive impact on pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school. During the inspection, the start of the school day was orderly, and it was evident that pupils knew they should be moving promptly to lessons and putting their phones away. Most complied well. The changes you have put in place have had a particularly good impact on reducing the use of derogatory and discriminatory language. Pupils know that the use of such language is not acceptable. Staff and pupils say that the use of offensive language is now rare. We heard none during the inspection.

The one-way systems and the clearer expectations of how pupils move around the school have helped the school to feel calmer. During the inspection, staff supervised corridors well and reminded pupils where they should be walking. Nevertheless, there remain areas of the school where significant bottlenecks exist, which can lead to severe overcrowding at lesson changeover times. You and trust leaders are continuing to consider what more can be done to make movement around the school more efficient, including seeking further external advice.

In lessons, we saw some impact of the new approaches to managing pupils' behaviour. Largely, classrooms were calm. In some, pupils were well focused on their learning and needed little prompting to focus. There was evidence of some staff using the strategies they have been asked to use, sometimes to good effect. You are well aware that variation remains, however, in how staff apply the strategies and the extent to which pupils respond. You and leaders are working with individual staff and with departments to secure greater consistency and to support staff where this is needed. Importantly, you are

also putting momentum into improving the quality of the curriculum and teaching in order to ensure that pupils make the progress that they should throughout their time at the school.

The pupils we spoke to were mainly positive about the changes that the school has made. Pupils like the way in which you have asked them for their thoughts on what could improve and what would make them feel safer. They understand the need for the new rules – indeed, some of these changes, such as how they queue up for lunch, have come from their own suggestions. There are other changes that they do not like as much, such as having to walk around the outside of the building to get to some parts of the school. Nevertheless, they understand the point of these changes. This is at least in part to the effective way in which you are communicating to pupils about the changes you are making, including through assemblies and visual reminders in corridors and classrooms. Most of the pupils we spoke to during the inspection told us that behaviour in lessons has improved, but that it is not consistent and that there is still a lot of low-level disruption. This aligns with the evidence from the inspection.

Suspensions from school have risen, but many of the pupils who have been suspended once have not then been suspended again. You have rightly identified the need to focus on rewards as well as consequences. The written behaviour policy does not currently reflect the school's approach to managing behaviour.

The single central record is compliant, with all relevant checks in place. Sampling of case files showed that leaders are taking clear action when they have a concern about a pupil and following these up as necessary. Following the last inspection, staff quickly received relevant training around early intervention, attendance procedures and reporting processes. In addition, staff have had training about the new behaviour expectations, including those related to the use of derogatory language and physical contact.

Leaders have put careful thought into making the systems for improving attendance more analytical in order to ensure that all pupils receive the support and challenge they need. The 'team around the child' approach is being carefully designed to help to focus the support and not replicate strategies that have not worked in the past. Attendance remains low, persistent absence is high, and the overall figure shows little sign of improvement. Nevertheless, the attendance of some individuals has improved. You have identified that sporadic non-attendance is a particular issue for some of your pupils, and know that it is crucial that you tackle this effectively as a matter of urgency. The attendance of pupils with SEND rightly remains a high priority for the school, as the attendance of pupils with SEND is particularly low.

The leader of SEND, with other senior leaders, has developed a new three-year plan which addresses the key areas of development. Leaders have identified that the most urgent priorities are to improve the identification of pupils with SEND, to define what those needs are, and to decide how best to meet each need. SEND has become a more prominent part of the school culture. Pupils' needs and the way to meet these are being discussed more frequently and systematically, including during briefings with staff and in

weekly meetings with curriculum and pastoral leads. This is helping to ensure that discussions are taking place in a timely way. Leaders are clearly aspirational for pupils but are aware that there is much work still to do in order to meet these aspirations.

The trust is dedicated to ensuring that the school improves swiftly and securely and is putting time, resources and energy into helping this to happen. They have created an accelerated improvement board (AIB) that meets on a monthly basis to focus on the progress being made against the areas for improvement. This group includes trustees and provides clear challenge and support to the school. The trust is investing significant resource into recruiting high-quality leaders and staff. The chair of the local academy governing board (LGB) has worked closely with the trust to recruit two new board members with the skills needed to help the school to improve. The LGB is also closely focused on the areas for improvement and, importantly, the chair is part of the AIB. The trust has sought a range of appropriate external support to complement the support already being provided by trust leaders and is well aware of the need for careful coordination of this support so that messages to leaders and staff are coherent.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer the multi-academy trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Sandwell. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Senior His Majesty's Inspector