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Dear Mr Edwards

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of UTC Reading

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 4 October 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 February 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, Jo-Ann Henderson, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI), and I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Activate Learning Education Trust, trustees and members of the interim executive committee 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, held meetings with staff and pupils, and scrutinised work and documents. We took into account a small number of responses to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as having serious weaknesses.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

After the last inspection, the previous executive headteacher and head of school left their posts. Since then, a small number of new staff have been appointed, including you as executive headteacher. Pupils and staff acknowledge that expectations have risen. You have rightly prioritised safeguarding. You have made improvements to behaviour management. The Activate Learning Education Trust has set up the interim executive committee to provide support and challenge. Several members of the trust's staff provide effective guidance for leaders. You and other leaders are making progress towards the essential improvements needed. You correctly identify that there is still much to do. During this first monitoring inspection, inspectors focused on checking the impact of your work to improve safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and the curriculum. We looked at curriculum implementation and considered the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Crucially, you have made some improvements to the culture of safeguarding. There is still more work to do, however. You have increased the number of trained staff who deal with safeguarding concerns. However, the precision of actions taken following worrying incidents needs to improve. Most pupils have named staff who they can speak to if they have a concern. In addition, you have introduced an online system to enable pupils to report their worries. Pupils recognise and appreciate this. Most staff understand professional expectations and boundaries. Despite this, a few pupils still feel uncomfortable in some lessons.

Leaders have made a strong start to improving pupils' behaviour. You have provided much-needed clarity on the behaviour management system. Expectations have risen. Staff appreciate this. Pupils recognise that behaviour has improved in most areas of the school. However, there is still disruption to a significant number of lessons. A small minority of pupils still exhibit challenging behaviour that some staff do not address robustly. Small pockets of antisocial behaviour remain. This continues to make some pupils feel uneasy. Attendance has improved. Leaders' processes to monitor attendance are systematic. Actions to address poor attendance are having an impact. Improvements to cover arrangements when staff are absent have benefited students in the sixth form particularly. A similar focus is required in key stage 4 to ensure that pupils do not miss vital learning due to staff absence.

Improvements to the curriculum are in their infancy. In most subjects, leaders have carefully selected the key knowledge and skills that pupils need to learn. Staff present information clearly. In some subjects, leaders have sequenced learning precisely so that new knowledge builds on pupils' existing understanding. Leaders need to ensure that this is the case across all subjects. The support for pupils with SEND is still not helping them to achieve well in all lessons. Work has begun to improve the identification of the needs of pupils with SEND. However, staff are not trained to adapt learning for these pupils' needs sufficiently well. Support for weaker readers is underdeveloped. Further work must be undertaken to identify precise gaps in pupils' phonics knowledge.

The school has recently introduced a well-constructed personal, social and health education curriculum. Through this, pupils learn important aspects of relationships and sex education. Importantly, not all staff receive training to deliver these critical lessons. Leaders should address this urgently. Pupils benefit from dedicated weekly personal and professional development time. Daily tutor time focuses on important issues such as citizenship and careers choices. Some pupils do not yet see the value of these sessions.

Leaders' monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum are improving. However, the consistency of implementation across all subjects is still too varied. Staff training has not yet focused on embedding key strategies to support pupils to learn the curriculum. Some staff benefit from targeted support through 'personal improvement plans'. However, the support that leaders provide is not always as precise as it needs to be.

The trust is determined that UTC Reading succeeds. As a result, decisive actions have begun to improve the school. The interim executive committee members include experienced leaders. The committee is providing appropriate challenge and support. Importantly, the trust recognises the need for improvements to be sustainable. You have made a start to appointing new senior leaders. This is to strengthen the strategic leadership of the school. Your continued focus on bolstering leadership needs to extend to middle leadership as well. Staff are positive about the changes to the school. They say that leadership is more purposeful. You have commissioned relevant external reviews to support your continued focus on improvement. Your action plan sets out clearly how leaders intend to bring about changes. There are some actions that leaders could sharpen up, for example the timeliness of actions to improve the curriculum.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of the Activate Learning Education Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Reading. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Culling
His Majesty's Inspector