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Rowena Hackwood
David Ross Education Trust
Chief Executive Officer
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Dear Ms Hackwood

Focused review of David Ross Education Trust

Following the focused inspections of 13 academies in the David Ross Education Trust ('DRET' or 'the Trust') in September 2017, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors in October 2017, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during my visit to the Trust with my colleagues, Deborah Mosley HMI and Ian McNeilly Senior HMI, on 3 and 4 October 2017. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders, who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the focused review and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- The Trust has been operating for 10 years. After this time, too many pupils are underachieving by the end of key stages 2 and 4. In 2016, pupils made less progress than the national average in reading and mathematics at key stage 2 and in mathematics at key stage 4. Headline attainment was below national averages in both key stages.
- Trustees did not hold directors and leaders to account with sufficient rigour in the past. The Trust has not had clear enough structures in place to enable them to intervene quickly and successfully when an academy has been identified to be underachieving or at risk of decline. Recently, they have begun to rectify these problems.

- Trustees and directors have not used information relating to the performance of individual academies to systematically improve the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils across the Trust.
- Arrangements for governance are unclear. Some members of local governing bodies do not understand that their role is not the same as that of a governor in a maintained school. Senior trust staff acknowledge that some local governing bodies have not been fully effective in their delegated roles. Having identified this as an area of concern, the Trust is reviewing governance arrangements. In some academies, the Trust has replaced the local governing body with an academy improvement board where they require focused intervention to improve the impact of governance.
- While attendance in some academies is above the national average, the attendance of pupils across the Trust is below that seen nationally, both in primary and secondary schools. The persistent absence of pupils who are eligible for free schools meals is higher than that of their peers in almost all DRET academies. Although positive action has been taken very recently, the Trust has not successfully addressed this long-standing issue.
- The Trust has not effectively supported academies in their drive to recruit staff. This means that some academies have struggled to appoint permanent high-quality teachers.
- DRET has a proud tradition of providing high-quality opportunities for pupils of all ages, for example in music, sport, and outward bound expeditions. The Trust capitalises on the resources at its disposal to ensure that staff receive ongoing training and that pupils can perform to a high standard.
- The Trust has been successful in improving the quality of education in many of its academies, as indicated by their inspection grades. At the time of the review, 82% of primary academies had been judged to be at least good, compared to 32% when the schools joined the Trust. While there is an improved profile for secondary academies, only half of secondary academies are currently judged to be providing a good standard of education.
- Academies' leaders and staff work together in local clusters, supported and challenged by 'Academy Improvement Leads' (AILs). This has been particularly successful in the primary sector, with principals reporting that the AILs know their academies well.
- There have been significant, Trust-wide changes in the last year. The sponsor is now the chair of the board of trustees and you were appointed as the chief executive officer in May 2017. Although you took up your post as full-time chief executive officer in August 2017, your preparatory work enabled you to begin from an informed perspective.

- Arrangements for safeguarding across the Trust are effective.

Evidence

Focused inspections of 13 academies were carried out from 26 to 27 September 2017. Seven of these inspections were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). Six inspections were carried out under section 8 of the same Act. Of these, two inspections converted to a full inspection under section 5. Four of the academies had not been inspected previously.

The outcomes of the section 5 inspections were:

- one academy that had not been previously inspected was judged to be good
- of the other academies that had not been previously inspected, two were judged to require improvement and one was judged to have serious weaknesses
- the overall effectiveness of one academy remains unchanged; this academy still has serious weaknesses
- two academies had been previously judged to require improvement. One has improved and was judged to be providing a good standard of education; the other was judged to still require improvement
- two academies that had previously been judged to be good had declined and were judged to require improvement following their converted inspections.

The outcomes of the section 8 inspections were:

- four academies continue to provide a good standard of education.

Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) held telephone discussions with principals in 12 DRET academies on 28 September 2017. During the follow-up visit, HMI held discussions with the sponsor, the chief executive officer, four trustees and four directors. They also met with two representatives of Trust local governing bodies and seven academy improvement leads for primary and secondary academies. Finally, a discussion was held with the executive director of music and the sports enrichment manager. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised.

Context

David Ross Education Trust is a large multi-academy trust with 34 academies: 22 primary, 11 secondary and one special academy. The Trust is spread over eight local authorities in the East Midlands, London, and the North East, Yorkshire and Humber.

Twenty-two of the academies are sponsor-led academies, 10 are academy converters and two are free schools.

The Trust is well established. The first school to join the Trust did so in 2007. The Trust grew slowly in the early years. However, 29 schools joined the Trust over a three-year period between 2012 and 2015. The most recent free school opened at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London, in September 2017.

The previous chair of the board of trustees left his position in January 2017. An acting chair held the post in February 2017. A month later, the Trust board elected the sponsor to be the new chair.

You took up your post as chief executive officer in August 2017. Prior to this, you undertook the role on a part-time basis from June 2017 in order to begin to familiarise yourself with the workings of the Trust.

There have been several changes to the membership of the board of trustees and directors over the past two years.

Main findings

Currently, the inspection outcomes as a whole for the Trust's academies, including the most recent focused inspections, are as follows:

- four academies are outstanding
- twenty are good
- seven academies require improvement
- two are inadequate
- one academy has yet to be inspected.

The Trust has improved the overall effectiveness of 17 academies since they joined DRET.

The overall effectiveness of two academies has declined since they joined the Trust.

In 2016, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of the early years was in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check was only just below the national average. Provisional information indicates that these results have been maintained in 2017.

Despite the general improvements in the quality of education across the Trust, pupil achievement has not improved quickly enough across all key stages. In 2016, pupils in key stage 2 made less progress than was seen nationally in reading and mathematics. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard was lower than the national average in both reading and mathematics separately and in reading, writing and mathematics combined. In 2016, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in writing at the end of key stage 2 was above the national average. Provisional assessment information for 2017 indicates that the

proportion achieving this standard in writing is now below the national average. This information also shows that for almost all indicators, the rate of improvement in the progress of pupils is not keeping pace with that seen nationally. Provisional assessment information for 2017 further indicates that in most primary academies, the progress score for disadvantaged pupils is below zero in reading, writing and mathematics.

At key stage 4, the 2016 attainment 8 and progress 8 scores for secondary schools in the Trust was below the national average. The proportion of pupils achieving A* to C in GCSE English and mathematics was substantially below the national average. Disadvantaged pupils performed slightly better at key stage 4 compared to key stage 2 in 2016. However, the progress scores for disadvantaged pupils at key stage 4 were negative in all measures.

Trustees acknowledge that they have not held directors or leaders to account with sufficient rigour until recently. They have not ensured that sufficiently clear strategies to improve outcomes for pupils have been in place. In many instances, interventions were implemented, but when found not to be successful, further interventions were put in place. Trustees did not give careful consideration to a long-term plan for sustainable improvement with clear lines of monitoring and accountability. For some academies, effective support for improvement has been too slow in arriving, leading to declining performance. Recent changes have resulted in trustees, including the chair, placing a greater emphasis on holding leaders to account for pupil outcomes.

Arrangements for governance have not been sufficiently clear. The scheme of delegation is made available to all local governing bodies, but members do not restrict their work closely enough to the aspects for which they are directly responsible. There is currently a combination of local governing bodies and academy improvement boards across the Trust. Some local governing bodies are operating successfully, but too many require the support of directors or trustees to help them fulfil their roles well. The Trust, having recently recognised this, has commissioned a review of governance in order to improve this aspect of their work.

The Trust has not had a fully effective strategy for recruitment. The Trust has been unsuccessful in filling teacher vacancies in some academies. This has led to some classes, particularly in secondary academies, being taught by supply teachers for prolonged periods. You recognise that this is not a satisfactory solution in the long term and have plans to recruit more successfully in future.

DRET academies have traditionally operated in local clusters. This has had a degree of success, particularly for primary schools. Principals who spoke with inspectors feel that 'academy improvement leads' know the academies they support well. They support principals to evaluate the work of their academies and to write plans for improvement. Professional development for leaders and staff, organised either through the teaching school alliance or through local routes, has been well received.

Principals are able to point to several examples of how this has improved the quality of teaching and leadership in their individual academies.

In secondary academies, however, the clusters have had limited success. This is partly due to their geographical spread, which has hampered the sharing of effective practice. Although there have been some successes, there has not been a clear strategy to ensure that all clusters are effective. Overall, the lack of effective policies and procedures has meant that the Trust has been slow to intervene with proven support and challenge to prevent academies slipping into decline or underachieving.

While the rate of attendance in some academies is above the national average, in too many academies, pupils' attendance is low overall. In 2016, the rate of attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was below that of other pupils in every secondary academy and most primary academies. Rates of persistent absence of pupils eligible for free school meals are high. In several academies, the rate of persistent absence of this group of pupils is more than twice the national average. The Trust has been very slow to provide academies with the support they have needed to successfully address this situation. A recent programme of training for staff to improve attendance has taken place in 10 academies. Over six months, this has improved the attendance in nine of the academies. This has yet to be rolled out to all academies. At the start of the autumn term 2017, you introduced a 'sprint' on attendance. This means that every academy across the Trust highlighted the importance of attendance to pupils and parents with renewed vigour for one week. Initial feedback from all academies shows that they have participated in this 'sprint' with enthusiasm, leading to early signs of improvement in many cases.

The Trust takes great pride in the opportunities it offers for pupils to participate, and excel, in music and sport. This aspect of the Trust's work has a long-standing record of success. Pupils learn to play musical instruments and can participate in ensembles or even represent the Trust in county youth orchestras. Over recent years, almost 2,000 pupils have participated in carol services at Hull Minster. Several pupils have not only attended, but have also had the opportunity to perform in an opera. Pupils compete in Trust-wide summer and winter sports events. These events are typically attended by Olympic athletes to inspire the pupils.

Professional development for academy staff is key to the success of these experiences. Well-conceived initiatives in both sport and music motivate pupils to participate. Staff make clear their high expectations of pupils' attitudes to learning, including their appearance, academic efforts and attendance. These expectations have to be met before pupils are given the honour of representing their academy. Pupils can take part in outward-bound expeditions as far afield as Canada. Bursaries are made available for those pupils who show particular promise to develop their skills to a very high level. Case studies and Trust information demonstrate that these opportunities can have a positive impact on attendance and, to some degree, academic achievement.

By the time of your appointment in June 2017, the sponsor, who is now the chair of the board of trustees, had decided to make significant changes. Several new appointments were made at trustee and director level. This was a key moment in the history of the Trust.

Since your appointment, you have successfully shared your vision for the future of DRET. You have communicated, through a three-year strategy document and face-to-face meetings, your vision for a 'world-class education'. Principals, directors and trustees who spoke with inspectors understand the recent initiatives you have introduced, such as 'sprint, fix, build' and the 'Team Around The School', and their intended role in bringing about improvements to standards. Very early feedback from academies indicates that principals are implementing your initiatives. It is, however, far too early to judge whether the widespread changes that are being introduced will be fully effective or sustainable in the long term.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding arrangements across the Trust are checked regularly. At the time of this review, every academy had been judged by Ofsted, at its most recent inspection, to have effective safeguarding arrangements. The director with responsibility for safeguarding has been outward looking, seeking support from the best practice he could identify. Academy improvement leads check each academy's procedures and culture of safeguarding during their visits and report their findings to the Trust. A Trust-wide audit of safeguarding was undertaken in May 2017. The director wasted no time in drawing up a detailed action plan to highlight any areas that could be improved further. This has been acted upon swiftly. You have clear lines of communication with the director and the academies' designated safeguarding leaders to support this important aspect of the Trust's work.

Recommendations

- Improve the progress that pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, make by the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4.
- Systematically improve pupils' rates of attendance and reduce the persistent absence of pupils eligible for free school meals.
- Ensure the Trust acts more swiftly when it identifies that an academy is at risk of underachieving, deploying high quality support to secure sustainable improvement.
- Ensure the structures, roles and responsibilities of governance are clearly understood by all stakeholders to enable effective accountability.
- Ensure that trustees, directors and leaders at all levels are held to account for their role in improving outcomes for pupils.

- Implement an effective strategy to recruit high-quality staff, especially where individual headteachers have particular difficulties with recruitment.

Yours sincerely

Di Mullan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the Trust

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspections – section 5 inspections (including those that converted from Section 8 inspections)

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade (date)	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Edward Heneage Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	North East Lincolnshire	October 2012	4 (2016)	4 (2017)
Eastfield Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	November 2012	2 (2014)	3 (2017)
Newnham Primary School	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	September 2013	3 (2015)	2 (2017)
Thomas Hinderwell Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	North Yorkshire	November 2013	3 (2015)	3 (2017)
Quay Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	East Riding of Yorkshire	February 2015	Not previously inspected	3 (2017)
Ingoldsby Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	March 2015	Not previously inspected	2 (2017)
Skegness Grammar School	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	September 2012	2 (2014)	3 (2017)
Thomas Middlecott Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	March 2015	Not previously inspected	4 (2017)
Charnwood College	East Midlands	Leicestershire	April 2015	Not previously inspected	3 (2017)

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspections – section 8 inspections

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade (date)	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Hogsthorpe Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	September 212	2 (2013)	2 (2017)
The Arbours Primary Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	January 2013	2 (2014)	2 (2017)
Fairfield Primary School	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	North East Lincolnshire	January 2015	2 (2010)	2 (2017)
King Edward VI Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	September 2012	2 (2014)	2 (2017)

Academies that were part of the focused telephone calls

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade (date)	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Welton CE Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	October 2012	1 (2006)	1 (2006)
Briar Hill Primary School	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	November 2012	3 (2014)	2 (2016)
Wold Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston-upon-Hull	October 2013	4 (2012)	1 (2015)
Endike Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston-upon-Hull	November 2013	2 (2013)	2 (2015)
Abbey CE Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	December 2013	4 (2012)	2 (2015)
Ainthorpe Primary School	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston-upon-Hull	December 2013	3 (2013)	2 (2017)
Kings Heath Primary Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	February 2014	4 (2014)	2 (2017)
Havelock Academy	North East, Yorkshire	North East Lincolnshire	September 2007	2 (2015)	2 (2015)

	and Humber				
Humberston Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	North East Lincolnshire	August 2011	2 (2010)	1 (2013)
Charles Read Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	September 2013	3 (2015)	2 (2017)
The Barnes Wallis Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	September 2014	Not previously inspected	2 (2017)
The Eresby School	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	May 2013	1 (2013)	1 (2016)

Other Trust academies

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade (date)	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Cedar Road Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	June 2016	2 (2011)	2 (2014)
Rockingham Primary School	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	August 2013	3 (2015)	2 (2016)
Greenfields Primary School	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	November 2013	3 (2013)	2 (2015)
Falconer's Hill Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	May 2014	4 (2013)	2 (2017)
Malcolm Arnold Preparatory School	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	September 2014	Not previously inspected	2 (2017)
Bringhurst Primary	East Midlands	Leicestershire	September 2016	2 (2012)	2 (2017)
Malcolm Arnold Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	September 2010	4 (2015)	3 (2016)
Lodge Park Academy	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	January 2013	3 (2014)	3 (2016)
Bobby Moore Academy	London	Newham	September 2017	Not previously inspected	Not yet inspected