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27 March 2015

Mr Kevin Crossley
Chief Education and Operations Officer
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Dear Mr Crossley

Focused inspection of Collaborative Academies Trust

Following the focused inspection of Collaborative Academies Trust (CAT) from 16 to 25 March 2015, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

Inspection activities

Four of the trust's academies were inspected in the week commencing 16 March as part of the focused inspection. Two of these inspections were the academies' first section 5 inspections and two were section 8 monitoring inspections. Telephone discussions were held with senior leaders in the other five academies. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors, Alison Bradley and Sue Frater, conducted a follow-up visit on 24 and 25 March 2015. They held discussions with you, other members of staff, directors and strategic partners, scrutinised a range of relevant documentation and took account of data for individual academies and the trust as a whole, including previous inspection findings.

Thank you for your cooperation and that of the staff, directors and strategic partners we met during our visit. We appreciate the thought given to putting together the programme of discussions and range of evidence and the time that you and others kindly gave to talk with us.

Context

Collaborative Academies Trust was set up in 2012 by EdisonLearning.

There are currently nine academies in the trust. The first three, all in Northamptonshire, joined in November 2012 having previously worked with the sponsor as part of a local improvement partnership. A further three academies joined in April 2013, followed by another in January 2014. These four are all in Somerset.

The remaining two academies joined at the beginning of this academic year. One is a new school in Somerset, the other is in Essex. All the academies, with the exception of Kingsthorpe College, are sponsored and primary schools. Seven of the eight predecessor schools had been judged as inadequate or requiring improvement at their last inspection before joining the trust.

Summary findings

Too many academies have not improved since joining the trust. Of the five academies that have had a full inspection since joining the trust, only one has improved its inspection grade compared with its predecessor school. Two have remained the same and two have declined. This means that, at the time of the focused inspection, there were not yet any good or outstanding academies in the trust. Leaders fully accept that improvement has not been fast enough. Systems for supporting and challenging individual academies are improving.

There are early signs of improvement. In the two academies first inspected in March 2015, one improved its inspection grade and one remained the same compared with their predecessor schools. Monitoring visits to the two academies judged to require improvement have found that senior leaders, governors and the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement. The weaknesses found in initial action plans for the academy in special measures have now been rectified. In January 2015, the academy was judged to be making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The consequence of academies not improving quickly enough is that the trust's impact on pupils' achievement is inconsistent and limited. In the six academies that have been part of the trust for at least one full academic year, achievement is too variable. There is no evidence that across the trust the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is closing or that the needs of the more able pupils are being met.

The youngest pupils do not always get off to a good enough start. In the Northamptonshire cluster, the proportion of children reaching the level typical for their age at the end of Reception was very low in 2014. In two of the three Somerset academies that have been in the trust over a year, around half of pupils did not reach the phonics threshold in Year 1. Of the five primaries that joined the trust prior to September 2013, one had notable improvements in standards in 2014. In three of the others, outcomes at one or more assessment points declined. In two of these, less than a third of pupils reached the expected level for their age in reading, writing and mathematics at age 11. In one, outcomes were below the government's floor standards. Across the trust, progress in reading at Key Stage 2 improved last year, while in mathematics it fell. Overall, standards in both remain below national averages.

The proportion of students getting five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, has improved year on year at a higher rate than seen nationally, although standards remain below average. While progress in mathematics has improved, it has declined in English.

Leaders acknowledge that there are a number of reasons why improvement has not been fast enough. Initially, the trust's focus was more on support than challenge. Leaders did not make sufficient use of data about pupils' achievement or challenge academy leaders rigorously enough. The sponsor company's change in role from consultant to sponsor was not universally understood in the first academies. Advisers were too inflexible in their use of its school improvement materials and support packages were not sufficiently tailored to tackle the most pressing issues. There were too few people with the right expertise working with the first academies.

Trust leaders have now put better systems in place to collect a wide range of key performance indicators for each academy every six weeks. The trust reviewed and improved the performance indicators for this academic year to include pupils' achievement in all year groups rather than just at the end of key stages. There are, however, some key criteria missing that are needed in order to determine whether all groups of pupils are achieving well at all stages in their education. Some indicators, such as what 'expected progress' is, need clarifying so that leaders can be sure they are applied consistently across the trust.

'Team around the school' meetings for each academy, chaired by you, bring together key stakeholders three times a year to consider data, hold the academies to account for progress and to determine the actions and support needed. As a result, the trust has a better working knowledge of each academy. Regardless of the time they have been part of the trust, senior leaders feel that the trust knows their academy well. Most find the regular meetings both challenging and supportive. However, there is not always enough consideration in meetings of indicators such as attendance that are likely to have a direct impact on achievement.

There has been a shift from general to more bespoke support. Each academy now has either an academy learning adviser or an externally commissioned consultant tailoring support to their needs. Academies continue to have access to advisers from the sponsor company. However, while senior leaders are aware that autonomy is earned as the academy improves, they are not always clear that the level of support will decrease as they become more effective.

The external school improvement partners appointed by the trust are beginning to provide better challenge for the academies. Their work is not, however, quality-assured. At times, they are not sufficiently accurate in their analysis of data or precise enough about what needs to improve. The distinction between school improvement partners' role in challenging academies and advisers offering support is not always clear.

The trust has been quicker to tackle weaknesses in leadership more recently. Evidence from focused inspection activity and monitoring visits indicates that the trust is making good appointments to senior leader posts.

All academies currently receive the highest level of support. To date, this has been focused mainly on improving senior leadership and management and on developing teaching. While there is evidence of impact, academies are not improving quickly enough. Opportunities for school-to-school support within the trust are limited at present. Despite weaknesses in core subjects or aspects of academies' work, such as early years provision, the trust does not, as a matter of course, directly provide or commission specific support. It tends to rely instead on academies joining local networks. Where it has brokered specialists, for example for secondary mathematics, the work has been more successful.

The trust's model of governance is well documented, setting out the respective responsibilities of the directors and local governing bodies. Responsibility for developing governance at cluster level is clear. The trust uses experienced governors to support local governing bodies in developing their role in holding senior leaders to account. This has successfully improved governance in some academies, but by no means in all. Oversight of governance across the trust is less well defined. Stated policy and practice do not always match. Some governing bodies focus too much on operational matters. The trust has decided, as a result, to take back some delegated responsibilities so that it is clear that, until academies improve, local governing bodies should focus solely on pupils' achievement. As such, it has started to review terms of reference for local governing bodies.

The board of directors has responsibility for strategic oversight of the trust and for evaluating performance against key indicators. However, the oversight of the impact of the trust's work tends to lie with you. You have an in-depth knowledge of each academy from your regular meetings with them. Your detailed reports to board meetings keep directors up to date about individual academies. While the trust has a good range of data for each academy, the use of data to look at performance across the trust is under-developed. Directors are aware of this and are in the process of investing in systems that will analyse academy- and trust-level data to allow better monitoring of the impact of the trust's work.

You, as chief officer, and the directors have conducted an accurate appraisal of the trust's current position, identifying its strengths and weaknesses correctly. With no good or outstanding academies it is some way off its ambition of successful organisations working together in collaborative autonomy. Any expansion needs to be carefully considered to ensure a better balance of successful academies that can offer support to those that need it. The strategic plan suggests a sensible approach: strengthening the performance of current academies first, before taking on new ones at a manageable pace to build capacity and develop a structure of regional hubs.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the work of school improvement partners is:
 - rigorously quality assured so that their assessment of academies' performance and self-evaluation is consistently accurate and challenging
 - distinct from the support provided by academy learning advisers.
- Increase the range of key performance indicators further so that they provide an accurate check as to whether all pupils are achieving well.
- Review the use and commissioning of resources to make sure that academies get the specific support that they need to improve.
- Ensure that the board assumes full responsibility for monitoring the impact of the trust's work, using appropriate trust-level data.

Yours sincerely

Alison Bradley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspection – first section 5 inspections

Academy	Region	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Predecessor school – most recent inspection grade	Inspection grade, March 2015
Manor Court Community Primary	South West	Somerset	01/04/2013	4 – special measures	3
Priorswood Primary	South West	Somerset	01/04/2013	3	3

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

Academy	Region	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Most recent s5 inspection and date	Monitoring inspection history
Spring Lane Primary	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	01/11/2012	3 (06/2014)	October 2014: taking effective action March 2015: taking effective action
Kingsthorpe College	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	01/11/2012	3 (06/2013)	October 2013: taking effective action June 2014: taking effective action March 2015: taking effective action

Other academies

Academy	Region	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Predecessor school – most recent inspection grade	Most recent s5 inspection and date	Monitoring inspection history
Lumbertubs Primary	East Midlands	Northamptonshire	01/11/2012	3	4 – special measures (05/2014)	October 2014: action plans not fit for purpose January 2015: action plans fit for purpose. Reasonable progress.
Wellesley Park Primary	South West	Somerset	01/04/2013	4 (special measures)	Not yet inspected as an academy	
Woolavington Village Primary	South West	Somerset	01/01/2014	4 (special measures)	Not yet inspected as an academy	
Willowdown Primary	South West	Somerset	01/09/2014	N/A (new school)	Not yet inspected as an academy	
Willow Brook Primary School and Nursery	East of England	Essex	01/09/2014	3	Not yet inspected as an academy	