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Professor Michelle Lowe
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Dear Professor Lowe

Focused review of Education Central Multi Academy Trust

Following the focused review of seven schools in the Education Central Multi Academy Trust (ECMAT or 'the Trust') academies in June 2017, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors, 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 our visit on 26, 27 and 28 June 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 slow to get to grips with what needs to be done to support and improve the quality of education provided in its schools. Six schools were judged to be less than good at their most recent full inspections, including three which were judged inadequate.
- No secondary school is currently judged good. At the most recent full inspection, standards were found to have declined in all the Trust's secondary schools.
- The Trust's stated aim to raise aspirations has not translated into an effective strategy to secure sustainable and consistent school improvement. Six of the 12 schools in the Trust that have been inspected are judged less than good.
- The attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils by the end of key stage 4 is poor.

- Until recently, Trust leaders had not done enough to provide strong leadership of school improvement. This allowed weak teaching to persist and poor decision-making by some school leaders and local governors to go unchecked.
- In the last 12 months, especially under your leadership as the new chief executive officer (CEO), the Trust has started to manage information and resources with more efficiency and forethought. This is starting to benefit the quality of education in schools, but has yet to be consistently demonstrated in pupils' outcomes.
- Trustees are not making full use of the information they receive about schools. Routines for checking on the impact of decisions made by the Trust are at an early stage of development. Furthermore, trustees do not set measurable Trust goals or targets to help them evaluate ECMAT's effectiveness.
- The Trust's identity and structure are not clearly understood by school leaders. This leads to confusion about roles, responsibilities, expectations and lines of accountability.
- The Trust's support for primary schools is more effective than its support for secondary schools. The work of the primary director is valued by schools and is bringing about change for the better in most primary schools.
- The Trust's plans to provide a similar level of support for secondary schools have been delayed. Given that all of the secondary schools are rated less than good, the current reliance on contracted support has not had sufficient impact.
- School leaders appreciate the opportunities to share and learn from effective practice both within and outside the Trust. They agree that the Trust actively promotes this and perceive this as a benefit of being an ECMAT school.
- The Trust now ensures that safeguarding is given a high priority in its schools and checks that statutory requirements are met.

Evidence

Focused inspections of seven schools were carried out between 20 and 21 June 2017. One of these inspections was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). Two short inspections of schools previously judged to be good were carried out under section 8 of the same Act, one of which converted to a full inspection under section 5 of the Act. Four inspections were carried out as monitoring visits under section 8 of the Act. Three of these monitoring visits were of schools previously judged to require special measures. The other monitoring visit was of a school previously judged to require improvement.

The inspection outcomes were:

- one school continues to require improvement
- one school judged good at its previous inspection continues to provide a good standard of education

- one school judged good at its previous inspection was judged to require improvement
- a school previously found to require improvement received a monitoring visit at which HMI concluded that school leaders were taking effective action to improve the school
- two schools previously placed in special measures received monitoring visits that concluded that school leaders were taking effective action
- HMI concluded that leaders were not taking effective action during the monitoring visit of one school placed in special measures.

HMI held telephone discussions with the headteachers of the six other ECMAT academies on 20 and 21 June 2017. During the follow-up visits, discussions were held with you and other staff from the Trust. Inspectors also met sponsors, trustees, commissioned consultants and headteachers of some Trust schools. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised, including the Trust's self-evaluation and draft improvement plans, governance arrangements, information about pupils' achievement and minutes of meetings.

Context

- ECMAT was established in April 2012, sponsored by the University of Wolverhampton. It currently includes 10 primary and three secondary schools which are located within five local authorities in the West Midlands: Birmingham, Sandwell, Staffordshire, Walsall and Wolverhampton.
- Across the Trust as a whole, 45% of pupils are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is higher than the national proportion.
- There are eight converter and five sponsor-led academies within the Trust. The first two schools opened in December 2012 as primary sponsor-led academies. Most of the other schools joined the Trust in 2013 and 2014. No new schools were opened in the 2015/16 academic year. No additional schools are due to join the Trust as yet, but leaders are keen to grow in size in the future.
- Before the inspections that formed part of this focused review, five of the Trust's schools had been inspected in 2016/17. One primary school improved from requires improvement to good, while one secondary declined from good to requires improvement. One primary school continued to be inadequate and was judged to require special measures, having previously been judged to have serious weaknesses, and one secondary school was judged to continue to require special measures. A further secondary school was judged to require special measures on its first inspection, with concerns about safeguarding identified.
- Currently, the inspection outcomes for the ECMAT schools, including the most recent inspections, are as follows:
 - six primary schools are judged good
 - two primary schools and one secondary school are judged to require improvement

- one primary and two secondary schools are in special measures
- one primary school has not been inspected since joining the Trust.
- No schools within ECMAT have received any warning notices from the regional schools commissioner.
- ECMAT is comprised of a board of nine trustees. The trustees, who are accountable to the Trust's members, include a representative of the sponsor, independent educationalists and chairs of local governing boards. The CEO is a trustee and a member of the Trust's leadership team. The trustees are responsible for school performance, setting the Trust's vision and strategy, and overseeing the financial performance of the Trust.
- The Trust's leadership team is comprised of eight officers, and one post was vacant at the time of the review. Trust officers hold responsibility for primary and secondary education, standards, governance, human resources, finance and operations across the 13 schools.
- The first CEO of the Trust retired in 2015 and was replaced by an interim CEO. You became CEO in December 2016.

Main findings

- Trustees' clearly stated ambition to raise pupils' aspirations has had limited impact in a number of schools. Too many pupils are receiving a less than good quality of education, and some have done so for a number of years. Since joining the Trust, standards in secondary schools have declined.
- Some of the Trust's early successes, such as those made at Woodhouse Primary Academy, were not capitalised upon. Trust leaders have not done enough to make their expectations clear. There has been insufficient focus on raising academic standards for pupils and Trust leaders have not, until recently, used information about schools' performance well enough. Consequently, the quality of education varies considerably from one school to another.
- A summary of pupils' achievements across the Trust in 2016 reveals that:
 - at key stage 2, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard was slightly lower than that seen nationally in reading and writing, but was in line with national figures in mathematics; progress was below the national score in each subject
 - disadvantaged pupils' outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics at key stage 2 were lower than for other pupils nationally
 - at key stage 4, pupils attained almost half a grade less than the national average; pupils' overall progress was also below the national score
 - disadvantaged pupils' achievement at key stage 4 was poor, particularly in English and mathematics: only just over one quarter of these pupils achieved a grade C or above in English and mathematics and their progress was almost one grade lower than all pupils nationally on average.
- The outcomes of the inspections and telephone discussions in June 2017 confirm that the Trust's impact in schools is inconsistent, with some school leaders being positive about the impact and others not. However, there are

now signs of improvement in some schools where standards are not good. For example, leaders in three of four schools judged to be less than good are taking effective action in tackling the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

- Inspections and telephone discussions identified common features about the Trust's work with its schools. These included:
 - recent leadership appointments, for example the director of primary academies, are bringing greater levels of challenge and support to some schools
 - where standards have declined, schools now receive support which is targeted at appropriate areas, whereas in the past identified concerns had not been addressed swiftly
 - school leaders are starting to understand how experience and expertise within the Trust's schools are being used to support school improvement
 - strong and effective support exists for newly qualified teachers
 - leaders value high quality and effective human resource and finance support from the Trust
 - local governing boards are not always effective because they are uncertain about their accountabilities
 - information about behaviour and the attitudes of pupils are not regularly sought, and therefore not evaluated, across the Trust.
- Trust officers regularly collect information from schools about pupils' outcomes. Their most up-to-date information suggests that where the Trust has provided or commissioned support, this is contributing to improvements. Even so, it is still a mixed picture.
- In secondary schools, the measures that school leaders use to monitor progress suggest improvements in pupils' progress in some subjects, but not in others.
- Until recently, schools within the Trust have been left to set their own priorities for improvement. This has contributed to more successful improvement in some schools than others. The Trust is becoming clearer in its expectations for school performance. The Trust's current systems to collect information to hold schools, and themselves, to account have improved. However, trustees do not yet use this information to drive strategic planning or demonstrate Trust-wide school improvement. Currently, there is still much to be done to boost school performance across the Trust.
- Trustees have encouraged external scrutiny and review of the Trust's work, but have not acted on recommendations. For instance, in 2015, a thorough and high-quality external review of governance arrangements identified that communication across the trust could be improved, and provided recommendations. However, it is only now that the Trust is acting on these recommendations.
- School leaders do not have a consistent understanding of what it means to be an ECMAT school, how this affects the way schools work and what is expected from them.

- Trustees remain keen to respect local autonomy and have taken action to improve local governance, such as providing training and placing a representative of the Trust on each local governing board. Despite this action, some local governing boards do not fully understand the ECMAT's expectations and lack the necessary knowledge and skills to hold schools to account. The Trust has taken effective action to remove unsuccessful local governing boards.
- The primary director provides schools with well-informed advice and accurate evaluations. Too often, he is having to provide very basic advice because of weaknesses in schools. For example, some schools are not setting clearly defined and measurable success criteria, nor are they assessing pupils accurately. The primary director is challenging this but is receiving a mixed response, and some resistance, from school leaders.
- Comprehensive and accurate information and recommendations from the primary director are not being considered or acted on by trustees. Consequently, the Trust does not set sufficiently ambitious goals that allow it to evaluate its effectiveness in driving school improvement.
- Support and challenge for secondary schools has not had the desired impact. The Trust has commissioned support that has identified shortcomings and recommendations which have not been fully addressed. Recent actions based on this support to schools provide evidence that improvements have started to be made.
- In schools where improvement has been secured, a key factor has been the appointment of strong headteachers who have been able to get the best from staff and pupils.
- The ways the Trust shares information between different aspects of its central functions, including school improvement and human resources, has improved. Work to recruit leaders and support restructure of staffing in schools is well placed and responds appropriately to local needs. This valuable work enables school leaders to focus on other aspects of improving school performance.
- In the last year, the Trust's management of financial resources has been tightened up considerably. Until recently, trustees had no oversight of school spending, instead allowing school leaders the autonomy to plan and spend as they saw fit. This resulted in poor financial management. Some schools commissioned aspects of Trust support they wanted or thought they needed. On occasions, this led to very poor spending decisions at school level. Now, the Trust targets central funds at schools to address specific needs. However, the impact of this on school standards remains to be seen.

Safeguarding

- Until relatively recently, the Trust did not ensure that the school leaders were successfully following policies and expectations. As a result, inspections have identified that safeguarding was not effective in some schools. Once identified by inspectors, Trust officers swiftly and effectively addressed these concerns.

They now regularly check that safeguarding procedures are used properly and that the culture of safeguarding in Trust schools is effective across all schools.

- The Trust provides support to ensure that recent updates in safeguarding legislation and guidance are communicated to school leaders across the Trust. This includes producing clear policies that can be adopted by local governing bodies.
- A Trust officer provides effective advice and support to school colleagues when this is required. The Trust's designated safeguarding lead makes sure that effective links exist with relevant local authority designated officers and local safeguarding children's boards.
- The Trust has commissioned services that provide effective health and safety support for schools. Regular, systematic audits take place of health and safety practices in schools.
- A local network of school safeguarding leaders enables sharing of best practice. However, the Trust and school leaders recognise insufficient information is currently evaluated and used centrally to inform strategy to further improve safeguarding.

Recommendations

- Urgently improve teaching, learning and assessment and pupils' outcomes in schools where standards have been low for a long time.
- Urgently strengthen the Trust's support for secondary school improvement.
- Make sure trustees use the increasingly reliable information about each school's performance in order to set clear goals for improvement and inform strategic and operational planning.
- Ensure that Trust leaders regularly check and evaluate whether actions to drive school improvement are working and use the outcomes from these evaluations to shape future strategy.
- Make certain that trustees communicate the Trust's purpose and structure to schools:
 - in ways that are easy to understand and support a sense of what it means to be a school in this Trust
 - so that school leaders and governors understand what the Trust expects of them and what they can expect from the Trust.

Yours sincerely

Rob Hackfath
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of Education Central Multi Academy Trust

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 5 full inspection

School name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade in June 2017
Albert Bradbeer Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 September 2014	Predecessor school: October 2012 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Heathlands Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 June 2014	Predecessor school: November 2012 Good	Requires improvement (section 8 short inspection that converted to section 5 inspection)

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 short inspection

School name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade in June 2017
Featherstone Academy	West Midlands	Staffordshire	1 September 2014	Predecessor school: February 2012 Good	Good

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 requires improvement monitoring visit

School name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection outcome in June 2017
Smestow School	West Midlands	Wolverhampton	1 February 2014	October 2016 Requires improvement	Taking effective action

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 special measures monitoring visit

School name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection outcome in June 2017
The ACE Academy	West Midlands	Sandwell	1 March 2013	January 2017 Inadequate	Taking effective action

Edgar Stammers Primary Academy	West Midlands	Walsall	1 July 2013	November 2016 Inadequate	Not taking effective action
Wednesfield High Specialist Engineering Academy	West Midlands	Wolverhampton	1 January 2015	January 2017 Inadequate	Taking effective action

Schools that were part of the focused telephone calls on 20 and 21 June 2017

School name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent inspection date and grade
Fairway Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 April 2013	Predecessor school: October 2011 Satisfactory	January 2015 Good
The Orchards Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 July 2013	Predecessor school: November 2012 Requires improvement	March 2015 Good
Pye Green Academy	West Midlands	Staffordshire	1 October 2014	Predecessor school: February 2009 Good	Predecessor school: July 2012 Good
Reaside Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 December 2012	July 2014 Requires improvement	November 2016 Good
Tame Valley Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 December 2012	Predecessor school: May 2011 Satisfactory	May 2014 Good
Woodhouse Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	1 September 2013	Predecessor school: June 2012 Inadequate	July 2015 Good

All schools that are part of the Trust were involved in the focused review.