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Sir Paul Edwards
Chief Executive Officer
Unit 2, Carolina Court
Wisconsin Drive, Lakeside
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Nick Hudson
Regional Director, North East,
Yorkshire & Humber

Dear Sir Paul

School Partnership Trust Academies – focused inspections – 17 to 27 June 2014

Thank you for our telephone discussion on 16 June 2014 during which I notified you of the focused inspections for School Partnership Trust Academies (SPTA). Our work has enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for pupils in the academies.

Outline of inspection activities

Focused inspection

We inspected six primary academies as part of the focused inspection. All of these academies were due for inspection during the current academic year.

During the inspections, information was gathered on the use, quality and impact of SPTA support for school improvement by asking the following key questions of principals, governors and SPTA officers:

- How well does SPTA understand the context, strengths and weaknesses of their academies?
- How well does SPTA hold their academies to account? What structures are in place to do this? How is the improvement journey monitored?
- How does SPTA challenge and support their academies?
- What evidence is there of the impact of the Trust?

Telephone survey

Her Majesty's Inspectors conducted a telephone survey of a further 10 academies.

In addition to the questions noted above, principals in these academies were asked a further question:

If it is a good or outstanding academy:

- How well is SPTA making use of the academy's strengths to help others improve?

Or:

- Is there evidence to show that the trust knew that the academy was not 'good' or better before it was inspected?

Inspection outcomes

Of the six academies inspected during the focused inspection period:

- Three were judged to require improvement. Two of these academies have improved from inadequate.
- One academy remained inadequate.
- Two were judged as good. Both academies have improved from the previous judgement of satisfactory.

The inspections highlighted key weaknesses across several of the academies that were inspected. These include:

- teaching which is not consistently good and does not sufficiently challenge all groups of pupils to reach their potential
- weaknesses in teaching the most-able pupils and those who have special educational needs
- low standards at the end of Key Stage 2 in reading, writing and mathematics meaning that too many pupils are poorly prepared for secondary school
- pupils' attitudes to learning which are not consistently positive
- weaknesses in middle leadership which hinder improvements in teaching and achievement
- governance which lacks the expertise to challenge senior leaders about shortcomings in the quality of teaching and learning.

Four of the six academies are not providing a good quality of education. In one academy, SPTA has failed to tackle significant weaknesses in leadership and management which have declined to inadequate. The inspections of SPTA academies since January 2014 show that the percentage of good and better schools is

significantly below that seen nationally. More positively, it is encouraging that two previously inadequate schools have improved and two previously satisfactory schools are now judged to be good. Also, the percentage of schools showing improvement since the last inspection is higher than found nationally and gives some cause for optimism.

Responses to the key questions asked of those academies inspected during the focused period and those contacted by telephone were analysed. The key findings are outlined below.

Strengths

- The overwhelming view of principals is that academies are well supported by SPTA officers. The officers have a good understanding of each academy's context, strengths and weaknesses.
- Leaders at all levels understand the lines of accountability. In particular, academies value the work of the regional adviser and senior SPTA officers in challenging performance data and monitoring the quality of teaching through regular visits and analysis.
- The network of schools in SPTA offers opportunities for secondments and professional development.
- Many responses highlight the impact of HR in helping academies to manage underperforming staff and in supporting recruitment.

Areas for improvement

- Not all the Trust's academies are being held to account robustly. For example, the structured programme of meetings to check on performance does not always take place; some academies have gone without these meetings for significant periods.
- The quality of the notes of visits from advisers sometimes lack sufficient detail to fully inform judgements.
- Analysis of data by SPTA officers is not always considered in the context of other evidence about pupils' achievement, for example, pupils' work and the quality of teaching and progress over time. The conclusions of some of the analysis done by the SPTA are at odds with published performance data.
- The Education Advisory Boards (EAB) lack a clear understanding of how they should hold the academies to account.
- The criteria for measuring the performance of the EAB are unclear to principals. SPTA officers on the boards are not always sufficiently focused on improving performance.
- The performance of SPTA academies over time should be an issue of concern to the Trust.

In summary, there is some evidence of effective school improvement, particularly in the initial start-up period after conversion to academy status. However, the quality and impact of governance arrangements are variable. There are further concerns

regarding the depth and accuracy of SPTA analysis of data showing pupils' progress and the contribution this makes to rapid school improvement. Above all, there are too many underperforming academies which have remained in this position for too long.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve the quality of education for the children and young people attending academies which are a part of SPTA.

Please pass on my thanks to the SPTA officers who gave their time to talk to our inspectors. Do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss anything in this letter further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nick Hudson", written over a light blue circular stamp.

Nick Hudson

Regional Director, North East, Yorkshire & Humber