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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
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Adrian Larkin
Headteacher
Finch Woods Academy
Bailey's Lane
Halewood
Liverpool
Merseyside
L26 0TY

Dear Mr Larkin

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Finch Woods Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 20 November 2024, 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 October 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, 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, I discussed with you and the executive headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the chief executive officer (CEO) and the director of education of the Manor Hall Academy Trust, other staff, the chair of the trust board, members of the local advisory board of governors and a representative of the local authority 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. I also visited lessons, met with staff and pupils, and sampled pupils' work and a range of documentation. 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 no longer be judged as having serious weaknesses.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

The school, together with strong support from the trust, has taken swift action to improve the culture of the school. The school's leadership structure has been redesigned. All leaders now have clear lines of responsibility. This clarity is helping to increase the levels of accountability across the school. Staff know whom to approach if they have any questions about the school's provision. They have a renewed sense of confidence and are proud to work at the school. The school is clearly moving in a positive direction.

Since the previous inspection in October 2023, there have been significant changes in leadership, governance and staffing. At the time of the last inspection, the headteacher was not present. Soon after the inspection, the headteacher left the school. An interim headteacher was appointed, before the current headteacher was appointed in March 2024. A new CEO, chair of the trust board, vice-chair of the local advisory body, deputy headteacher and other leaders and staff were appointed in September 2024. Leadership and staffing have now stabilised.

The school buildings have undergone significant transformation. Pupils appreciate the new resources and facilities, including a gym. These improvements are fostering a sense of belonging and pride among pupils.

Since the last inspection, the school, with the help of the trust, has implemented a range of strategies to improve the quality of education. The curriculum is more ambitious than in the past. The structure of the curriculum has been overhauled to better meet the needs and interests of pupils. A wider range of subjects and qualifications have been introduced in key stages 3 and 4. Pupils can now follow entry-level and functional skills courses. They can access a range of vocational courses, such as construction. These changes are helping pupils to be prepared for their future. There is also now a greater clarity about the most appropriate examination routes that pupils can follow.

Staff now have a clearer understanding about the knowledge that pupils should learn in many subjects. Some recently designed subjects are being implemented but have not had sufficient time to be embedded. It is too early to see the impact of these. The school is continuing its work to develop the content of some subject curriculums so that they better align with pupils' needs. The school is also in the process of developing some of its assessment strategies to improve staff's checks on pupils' learning. While progress has been made in many aspects of the quality of education, the school recognises that the outcomes of pupils need to improve further.

At the time of the previous inspection, some pupils were educated at a different site and did not have access to a coherent curriculum. As a result, they did not achieve well. To address this, the school has built a new facility on site for these pupils. This is enabling them to have a more meaningful programme of learning. They now benefit from having access to specialist teachers and teaching areas. This is helping these pupils to learn better than they did in the past.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. You have provided some initial training for staff to better meet pupils' needs. However, you recognise that more is required. Some staff still do not adapt their teaching or support older pupils well enough. You have planned additional training to ensure that all pupils benefit from the improvements that you have already made.

Reading continues to be an ongoing priority for the school. Gaps in older pupils' reading knowledge are being identified. Older pupils are now reading every day with increased confidence. The school still needs to develop strategies to support older pupils, including the use of subject-specific terminology across the curriculum.

Pupils' behaviour is improving. The school is using the information it gathers on behaviour more systematically to reduce behaviour incidents. The school is tackling instances of pupils' misbehaviour through a variety of strategies, such as a suitable curriculum and improvements to the behaviour management and reward systems. The restructuring of the school day, with staggered breaks and lunches, is helping to keep pupils engaged and focused. All staff are assigned duty roles during breaktimes. The school has also increased the level of sensory support for pupils to support their behavioural and emotional needs. This is helping pupils to regulate their behaviour and is reducing the number of pupils out of class during lesson time. While many pupils behave sensibly during breaktimes and in lessons, the disruptive behaviour from some continues to hinder other pupils' learning.

The school has strengthened its attendance team and implemented new systems to monitor trends in attendance. A variety of strategies and support systems have been introduced to improve attendance, particularly for pupils who have high levels of persistent absence. There are very early signs that attendance rates are beginning to rise for some pupils. However, too many pupils, many of whom are disadvantaged, are frequently absent from school. This negatively impacts their achievement.

The provision for pupils' personal development has improved. The school has recently developed a well-designed programme of enrichment activities, such as football coaching and bicycle maintenance, within the school day. Some of these lead to accredited qualifications. In addition, all pupils now follow a similar programme of personal development. This is helping to ensure that all pupils are better prepared for life in modern Britain.

Staff feel well supported with managing their workload and enjoy being part of a collaborative team. They value the increasing links with other mainstream and specialist schools, which supports their professional development and training.

Since the previous inspection, governance structures have been redesigned. A performance improvement board (PIB) has been established, which includes representatives from the trust, the local academy board (LAB) and the local authority. This new structure has increased both the level of support and challenge provided to the school. The PIB regularly reviews the school's progress against identified priorities in the action plan. The action plan includes a range of appropriate strategies to bring about

further improvement. The LAB and trustees now receive regular, detailed updates on how well the school is doing and areas for further improvement. This is having a positive impact on how the LAB and trust hold leaders to account.

The school has recently secured support from an external consultant to review performance data. The school has increased its links with the local authority, which supports the school in addressing issues with pupils' attendance. The school has worked closely with another school within the trust to improve attendance systems and processes.

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

Yours sincerely

Ahmed Marikar
His Majesty's Inspector