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for Education

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Gary Weston
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Dear Mr Weston

As you know, Harmer Parr, one of our Education Advisers, visited Cromwell Academy on 30 June. He met you and your fellow governor Richard Laing, together with the Acting Headteacher Lauren Blyth and Andrew Goulding, the Principal of Hinchingsbrooke School, which is proposing to sponsor Cromwell from January 2018. He also visited classrooms on a tour of the school and met a group of Year 5 and Year 6 students. He spoke by telephone to both you and Lauren before the visit, and read the background information you sent him.

To set the context for this letter, I apologise for telling you what you already know. The school became a stand-alone academy in 2014 following an Ofsted inspection in 2013 which had judged it to be good. In May this year, its first inspection as an academy reached a different conclusion, namely that the school requires improvement. Since that time, the Headteacher has been absent from school, Lauren has been acting in her place, and you have actively begun the work of tackling the inspection issues. You report that you have had excellent support in your endeavours from Andrew and other staff, either from Hinchingsbrooke School or brokered by them. Lauren was clear that this support has been invaluable.

The Ofsted report highlighted a number of issues needing attention. Performance appeared to be in decline. While in no way disastrous, the school's recent results had been mediocre, with higher attainers and disadvantaged pupils tending to underachieve, particularly though not uniquely in mathematics. Parents seemed to have lost confidence in the Headteacher, and communication between her and the governing body was noticeably weak, with governors not being given sufficient information to hold the school to account. There had been a high turnover of staff.

Harmer was delighted to see that the school's response to these rather dispiriting judgements was to roll up its sleeves and attack the issues with considerable energy. Both staff and pupils have been impressed and energised by Lauren's leadership, and parents are reported to have responded well to her openness and preparedness to listen. Harmer was able to see Early Years and Key Stage 1 classes in action, and saw a high degree of energy and purpose. The school is very well-presented, with lively and interesting displays in corridors and classrooms. The Key Stage 2 classes were rehearsing for the forthcoming production, which has involved a large number of pupils, staff and governors in busy activity, some of which was going on during the visit. The overall impression from the lessons and books seen was of purposeful behaviour and attitudes, and generally reasonable progress, though it was clear that a sharper focus was needed in some areas.

A similar point can be made about the school's improvement plan, of which Harmer saw an early draft. The actions are appropriate, but the plan currently lacks the kind of specific success criteria that would provide precise targets to aim at and a means of evaluating progress at regular intervals. The aims to improve the attendance and progress of disadvantaged pupils, for example, would be strengthened by an analysis of what they are like now and the amount of improvement that is expected by when. Such precision would help governors to monitor progress, and the school to fine-tune its actions in response to emerging issues. Wherever possible, actions should be related to expected outcomes for pupils, and measurable. The school intends to introduce 'target tracker' in September, and this step should make it possible to set more challenging targets for pupils, better related to their prior attainment and capability.

Precise targets and milestones also make it easier for leaders to show the impact of their actions over time. The use of the pupil premium, for example, was criticised in the Ofsted report, and Harmer noted, in examining the two reports about it on the school's website, that the way the money was used made it difficult to show the impact of the actions taken. This was largely because the use of extra staffing resources was spread across different classes, rather than being targeted at specific priorities. Year 6 in September, Harmer was told, contains a relatively high number of disadvantaged pupils. As these are currently an underperforming group, it is likely that their progress will be behind where it should be. Harmer suggested, therefore, that some additional staffing should be directed specifically at this group to help them catch up. Allied to the point above about having precise targets and milestones, this initiative could provide powerful evidence of cause and effect to demonstrate the school's impact.

As you and your colleague demonstrated, the governors, although currently below strength, are totally committed to tackling the inspection issues and guiding the school through its present difficulties. You need to organise the review of governance as soon as possible to help you in this endeavour. You are receiving strong support from Hinchingsbrooke, and are already much better placed than before to meet the expectations placed upon you. Enthusiasm and commitment are certainly not lacking; in fact, there is a discernible passion to put things right. Andrew has already provided strong support, and the discussions around the creation of a multi-academy trust (MAT) are well advanced. Appropriate thought is also being given to how the MAT will develop in the future, creating economies of scale and the

sharing of expertise. Via personal contacts, Andrew has also been able to support the school with specific primary expertise, which Lauren has found invaluable.


In summary, the school is potentially well placed to improve rapidly. It is well-ordered, well organised and there is a palpable enthusiasm amongst the young staff. The school's internal environment is vibrant and stimulating. The distance to make up in terms of performance is not huge. The school is well supported by its proposed sponsor. At the same time, parts of the external environment have enormous potential, but at the moment appear somewhat drab and uncared for, somehow symbolic of the school's slide in recent times. There is enormous scope, therefore, to invest in improvements that will provide richer opportunities for pupils while at the same time giving tangible proof to outsiders that the school is changing.

The main risks in the short term are the relative inexperience of the staff and the governors, where Hinchbrooke's support will be crucial, and the hitherto rapid turnover of staff. The school is fully staffed for September, but it remains to be seen how well the new staff will bed in. The track record of Lauren and her team is short, but it is in many ways reassuring that morale is so high and that the school is, as one pupil put it, 'happier'. Harmer recommends that a return visit is made in the second half of next term to gain an update and to assess progress.

In the short term, the school should give priority to:

- creating an action plan that drives progress and permits regular monitoring by the governors and others;
- using this plan and the pupil premium plan to provide evidence of the impact of actions;
- considering the provision of dedicated additional support to disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 to ensure they make accelerated progress;
- ensuring that Lauren and the staff continue to receive strong support.

My thanks go to you and your colleagues for your hard work to ensure that Cromwell Academy recovers quickly, and that the pupils there have the best possible chance of success.

Yours sincerely


Tim Coulson
Regional Schools Commissioner
East of England and North East London

cc: Lauren Blyth, Acting Headteacher

cc: Andrew Goulding, Principal, Hinchbrooke High School
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