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8 March 2023

Mr Patrick McAteer, Chair of the Board of Trustees  
Mrs Rebecca Daulman, Chief Executive Officer  
Agora Learning Partnership  
The Orchard Primary School  
Gammons Lane  
Watford  
WD24 5JW

Dear Mr McAteer and Mrs Daulman

### **Summary evaluation of Agora Learning Partnership**

Following the summary evaluation of Agora Learning Partnership ('the trust') in January 2023, when I was accompanied by Kristian Hewitt, His Majesty's Inspector, and Richard Vasey, Ofsted Inspector, I am writing on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the trust on 18 to 20 January 2023. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

### **Summary of evidence gathering activities**

For stage 1 of this summary evaluation, four schools were inspected between April and December 2022. All these inspections were carried out under either section 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- Three schools received section 8 inspections. Two schools remained good. In one school, it was deemed that the outstanding inspection judgement may not be retained, and its next inspection will be a graded inspection under section 5.
- One school had its first section 5 inspection as a converter academy and was judged to be good.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior staff, the central services team and operational staff. I met with five representatives of the board of trustees, including the chair of the board. Three trustees attended in person and two trustees joined the meeting online. Inspectors visited four trust schools that had not been inspected during stage 1 of the summary evaluation process. In each of these schools, we met with the executive headteachers, headteachers, curriculum leaders in a range of subjects, early career teachers and pupils. Online meetings were also held with representatives of the academy governing boards from these schools. I conducted one telephone survey meeting with the executive headteacher and headteacher of one school and met with the headteacher of another school.

## **Context**

Agora Learning Partnership has nine primary schools within the trust. The schools are located in Hertfordshire local authority. The trust was established in July 2016. The trust was previously named Herts for Learning Multi-Academy Trust before changing to Agora Learning Partnership in August 2019.

The trust's schools vary in size from 178 pupils in Waterside Academy to 442 pupils in The Orchard Primary School.

The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) across the trust who receive SEN support is 17.3%. This is higher than the most recent national average figure of 12.6%, which was released in January 2022. The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged is similar to the national average, although this varies from school to school within the trust.

There is an unregistered alternative provision under the leadership of Warren Dell Primary School, one of the schools in the trust.

The trust board is made up of nine trustees. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight and performance of the trust and its schools.

## **Main findings**

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent inspections, are as follows:

- one school is judged outstanding;
- seven schools are judged to be good; and
- one school is judged to require improvement.

## **Impact of the trust on its academies – governance and delegation**

- The trust leaders, including those leaders in Agora Learning Partnership schools, place pupils' education and well-being at the heart of every decision that they make. This has resulted in careful consideration as to which aspects of policy and curriculum are agreed centrally, and where individual schools have flexibility to make 'local decisions for local children'. This means practice is closely aligned to reflect each school community.
- Leaders at all levels are universally proud to be a part of Agora Learning Partnership and have confidence in the expertise of the trustees. The trust's aims and ethos are based on a determination to provide a high-quality, inclusive education for all. Leaders have launched the 'Together Strategy' to make sure that as the trust grows, collaborative approaches continue to be at the centre of all activity, with all stakeholders.
- Trust leaders have given careful consideration to how the trust grows. They are making sure that, as the trust expands, the quality of support for its existing schools is not diluted. Furthermore, trust leaders have also ensured that they have sufficient capacity to help schools that may join the trust as well as other local schools.
- Trustees have only recently established their renewed vision and values. This has been communicated to pupils and staff. Nevertheless, there is more work to do to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding about the strategic direction of the trust.
- Trustees have effective systems for checking the quality of provision. They can harness this monitoring information to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the trust. There is a well-understood scheme of delegation that details the responsibilities of academy governors. This enables governors to hold leaders to account for actions taken.
- Careful consideration has been given to the support provided by the central services team. This team has expanded to include a chief operating officer and a human resources manager. This is strengthening the central services team's capacity to enable school leaders to strike the right balance between the operational and strategic aspects of their work. This enables school leaders to focus on school improvement and providing a high-quality education.
- Trust leaders proactively seek the views of stakeholders. This has highlighted an opportunity to better consider the well-being of staff. The work currently being completed is not rooted in a long-term strategy that is understood by all stakeholders and is not fully aligned closely with the trust's values and vision for growth.

## **Impact of the trust on its academies – leadership and management**

- The central team develops key systems and policies in aspects of the trust's work where consistency is needed across all schools. This is illustrated well through arrangements for information management and safeguarding. Some policy decisions are delegated to school leaders. Where this is the case, the trust closely monitors each policy's content and implementation, for example the behaviour policy. School leaders consider the behaviour culture they want to promote that suits the school's context and their pupils' needs and adapt the policy to reflect this.
- Leaders ensure that continuous professional development of staff is well established, including at leadership level. The opportunities provided are highly valued. They are often a reason cited by staff for applying to, and staying with, the Agora Learning Partnership. The trust places a high importance on supporting school leaders. Leadership and management are judged to be good in all the trust schools.
- The trust's approach to sharing effective practice across schools enables leaders to identify talent and to develop and retain staff. This is especially evident through the trust's peer review activity. There are an increasing number of opportunities for staff at all levels to share effective practice. These include through the developing role of 'Agora Associates'. Trust leaders are working to establish the parameters of these roles.
- Evidence from recent Ofsted inspections of the trust's schools indicates that the systems, including school-to-school support, have some established strengths and are developing further. This is having an increasingly positive impact on school improvement, especially in the trust's priority areas of meeting the needs of pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils.

## **Impact of the trust on its academies – curriculum and quality of education**

- The trust holds school leaders accountable for the quality of the work in the provisions they lead. There are established structures in place to quality assure and moderate the evaluation of the quality of education in the trust's schools. The peer review cycle is a key feature of this work. All staff describe this as a collaborative, trusted and transparent process. Throughout the schools, leaders and staff are encouraged to be constructively critical when evaluating the quality and impact of each other's work. They systematically draw on a wide range of information and data to diagnose strengths and aspects of the school's work that require refining. This helps them to determine the right actions to take, considering specifically what will make the biggest difference to pupils. Leaders can draw on the existing expertise across the trust to support individual schools with the specialist knowledge and experience that can lead to change.

- Trust leaders use an established working group model to support sharing of expertise across settings. This is working well in several areas, such as in sharing expertise about how to apply a range of behaviour strategies, and provision for pupils with SEND. Leaders plan to replicate this model to support other groups of staff to collaborate in the trust. To ensure that collaboration continues to be open and effective, leaders recognise that roles across the trust, for example the role of subject leader, need to be clearly defined to support shared understanding and equity of opportunity.
- The trust's commitment to supporting the success and achievement of vulnerable pupils is well defined. This includes support for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. This focus is embedded through all trust systems and processes to ensure that the needs of these pupils are fully understood and consistently met. As a result, vulnerable pupils are supported to achieve highly.
- School senior leaders appreciate the autonomy they have to improve and develop their own curriculum provision. They also welcome the support and challenge from the trust. The trust values and encourages schools to demonstrate their distinctiveness by designing a curriculum that is right for the pupils in each of their schools. The trust also has ambition for trust-wide approaches to how the curriculum is taught. However, this work is currently being undertaken and is not fully established. This means that there is not yet a consistent understanding and implementation of these aims among stakeholders.

### **Impact of the trust on its academies – Behaviour and Attitudes**

- Trust leaders have agreed principles and expectations of pupils' behaviour that underpin the work of all schools in the trust. Schools have some flexibility in the design and content of their policies to reflect the specific needs of their own pupils. Trust leaders routinely analyse data and intelligence related to behaviour and attitudes in order to identify improvements or opportunities for further development.
- Trust leaders' commitment to inclusivity is evident in each of the schools in the trust. The trust has invested and expanded capacity in staff expertise, to meet the needs of pupils who are at risk of exclusion. Their non-negotiable view is that all pupils should be supported to remain in school as far as is possible without being detrimental to themselves and others. In addition, there is a long-term strategy in place to formalise and expand provision, including the opening of a registered alternative provision. This work ensures that pupils with social or emotional learning barriers are well supported, including through specialist interventions and 'transition classes'. There is clear evidence that actions school leaders take enable these pupils to successfully remain in, and complete, their full-time education.

- Leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to support pupils requiring a school place through the fair access protocol. This had led to successful integration of many pupils into a mainstream school setting.
- Trust leaders are careful to check in each school: pupil movement; the use of alternative provision; and the extent of elective home education. This ensures that the risk of off-rolling within the trust's schools is mitigated against.
- The trust's focus on addressing pupil absence is having a positive impact in each of the trust's schools. Pupils know that it is important to attend school. Resources are deliberately targeted to support pupils and their families to achieve higher attendance rates. The implementation of a trust-wide curriculum for personal, social and health education ensures high quality and consistency with aspects of curriculum that support the developing personal attitudes of pupils. This includes important principles, such as learning about protected characteristics.

## **Safeguarding**

- Trust leaders fulfil their responsibility to ensure that pupils are safeguarded, and they make sure academy governors and school leaders do too. The trust has invested heavily in ensuring that its schools are safe and secure places for its pupils.
- Inspection reports in all trust schools confirm that safeguarding is effective. Trust arrangements to ensure that all pupils are safeguarded well are securely in place. Trustees check the effectiveness of safeguarding systems through both internal and external reviews. The chief executive officer has a rigorous process in place to audit the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding in all the trust's schools. This includes checks on how well leaders promote, develop, and successfully ensure a culture of safeguarding.
- Across the trust, there is a strong network of designated safeguarding leads. They work together to share training and expertise. Policies are up to date and meet statutory requirements. Each individual school adapts documents to reflect their individual circumstances and localities.
- Trust and school staff have regular safeguarding training. This is to ensure that they know the vulnerabilities and issues that pupils might be facing and how to report any concerns. The trust and its school leaders follow safer recruitment practices.
- Close work with external agencies, including local authorities, helps to raise and develop leaders' awareness of contextual safeguarding risks within the various communities each school serves.

## Recommendations

- Following a period of transition and evolution, the vision and values of the trust have been recently renewed. Although leaders have started to disseminate this vision, there is more work to do to ensure that this is articulated and fully understood by all stakeholders, including governors, staff, parents and pupils.
- Trust leaders have high expectations for the curriculum experience pupils receive. However, the policy aims for the way in which the curriculum should be taught are not consistently well understood by school staff across the trust. Leaders should ensure that their ambition for a shared pedagogical approach is explicitly defined and consistently well understood. They should then ensure that these aims are implemented in line with trust leaders' expectations effectively across all schools within the trust.
- Trust leaders should ensure that there are agreed, standardised descriptions of the roles and responsibilities within the trust. This will support staff at all levels to have a clearer understanding of their area of accountability and how to secure improvement. Furthermore, this will maximise the impact of ongoing collaboration and sharing of best practice between schools.
- Trust leaders want the trust to be an employer of choice. They seek and are responding to the findings of staff surveys. Leaders are also investing significant resources on staff training. Leaders should ensure that their work is underpinned by a clear and comprehensive trust-level strategy, to ensure that clear expectations are established and that the improvements made to the working culture are sustained.

Yours sincerely

Tracy Fielding

**His Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

School Information				Most recent inspection		
URN	School name	Local Authority	Date joined trust	Does the inspection relate to the school in its current form?	Inspection date	OE grade
144907	Alban Wood Primary School and Nursery	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	28/06/2022	Outstanding
144908	Bromet Primary School	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	12/01/2022	Good
144904	The Grange Academy	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	19/01/2022	Good
145351	Meryfield Community Primary School	Hertfordshire	01/01/2018	Yes	24/05/2022	Good
145352	The Orchard Primary School	Hertfordshire	01/01/2018	Yes	21/06/2022	Good
144906	Oxhey Wood Primary School	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	12/01/2022	Good
144905	Warren Dell Primary School	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	25/01/2022	Good
145257	Waterside Academy	Hertfordshire	01/01/2018	Yes	15/06/2022	Good
144903	Wilbury Junior School	Hertfordshire	01/09/2017	Yes	01/02/2022	Requires improvement

\*Schools highlighted received either a graded, ungraded or monitoring inspection in stage 1 of the MAT SE