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Mrs Sandra Graham
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Park Avenue
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Northumberland
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Dear Mrs Graham

Special measures monitoring inspection of Haltwhistle Community Campus Upper School

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 March 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in May 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence, I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the executive director of the Wellbeing and Community Health Service for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2015

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so progress is at least good in all subjects for all pupils by ensuring that:
  - accurate assessment is used by teachers to plan and to teach lessons at the right level for different groups of pupils
  - teachers mark pupils' work more frequently and more accurately so pupils are aware of the next steps they need to take to improve
  - there is a stronger and more consistent focus on encouraging pupils' enjoyment of writing and mathematics.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by ensuring that:
  - school development plans are based on a thorough and accurate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
  - clear timescales and deadlines for improvement, together with well-defined targets by which to measure success, are set so that the pace of school improvement increases
  - inconsistencies in the quality of leadership and teaching are tackled through more rigorous performance management and stronger accountability of staff
  - middle leaders are fully involved in evaluating pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility, so that they are held accountable for tackling any identified weaknesses
  - the curriculum meets the needs and interests of all pupils so that all are well prepared for their future studies
  - funding provided through the pupil premium is used effectively in raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including the most able
  - governors understand and use a range of evidence about the school's performance to enable them to provide an appropriate level of challenge to senior leaders and hold them to account
  - parents have access through the school's website to all the information the school is required to make available.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 8 and 9 March 2016

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher, leaders responsible for English, mathematics and special educational needs and disability, the parent and pupil support partner, three governors, including the chair of the governing body, a group of pupils and a group of staff. An HMI also held a telephone conversation with a national leader of education (NLE) providing school-to-school support. The inspector visited eight classrooms to observe learning, speak to pupils informally about their experiences of school and scrutinise the current level of work in pupils' books. Senior leaders accompanied the inspector on all of these visits. A wide range of documentation, including improvement planning and the academy's own analysis of pupils' current attainment, progress and attendance was also evaluated.

Context

One member of staff left the school at the end of December 2015 and has been replaced by a supply teacher until the end of the academic year. Two members of staff continue to be absent due to illness. These classes are also being covered by supply staff. One parent governor is in the process of being appointed, bringing the governing body to full capacity. Around one fifth of the Year 7 cohort has left the school in recent weeks. The school is in the process of securing a sponsor.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have secured the necessary external support to put the school on a surer footing towards the removal of special measures. The fundamental systems, processes and policies to underpin a quicker rate of improvement are now in place; there is a clear framework to bring about the changes in practice that are much needed. Senior leaders have the foundations in place to support more rapid and effective improvement; the hard work now begins – leaders need to ensure that their planned actions are making as much of a difference to teaching and pupils' progress as they anticipate.

An external consultant has supported the acting headteacher to devise a suitable improvement plan. This document has become a useful driver for improvement. Clear priorities and a series of measurable targets, which build on their ambition for what pupils should be achieving each half term, ensure that all stakeholders, including governors, are aware of what is expected and by when. Leaders are acutely aware that they need to monitor this plan more carefully to ensure that the actions they have devised lift the overall quality of teaching and enable pupils to reach their full potential.

Leaders make regular checks on the quality of teaching and the standard of pupils' work but their evaluations continue to lack focus. Typically, leaders focus on what the teacher is doing rather than the difference the teacher's strategies are making to pupils' learning and progress, including for different groups. As such, the slower rate of improvement for disadvantaged pupils and the most able over the last two terms has gone unchallenged. These pupil groups continue to underachieve from their starting points.

Staff are now clear about what is expected of them to bring about a better quality of teaching. Partnership working with an NLE has introduced a stronger system of staff appraisal, aligned to the school's priorities and grounded in measurable targets for each teacher regarding the progress their pupils must make. However, this accountability system remains in its infancy. It is not affecting the overall pace of change as much as it should because leaders' feedback to staff about the quality of their teaching is not aligned to the ambitious targets that have been set. While senior leaders routinely share what they have observed with individual teachers, their comments are often superficial and lack bite; some staff leave the debrief session unclear about what they still need to improve and the urgency with which it needs to happen.

Governance is beginning to strengthen. Governors now receive clearer information about the quality of teaching and its impact on pupils' outcomes. This has enabled the governing board to ask more pertinent questions, for example about the weaker progress of disadvantaged pupils, and challenge senior leaders to explain why a number of targets within the school's improvement plan have not been met. Governors are not as clear about how far they can take their challenge if they do not believe senior leaders are doing enough to make a discernible difference. Governors remain reliant on the information provided by the acting headteacher and the quality of this information lacks the insightful evaluation that is needed.

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the trust has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. Trustees and the governing board will need to ensure that they direct their energies carefully over the next few months so that the process of securing a sponsor does not detract them from pursuing a better quality of education for current pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is improving due to a clearer, more accurate and streamlined approach to assessment. Staff now receive more useful information about their pupils' current attainment and progress so that they can better meet their overall needs during lessons. Opportunities to observe other teachers, both within the school and at an outstanding school locally, have shown staff what is achievable from pupils' starting points. Where staff have reflected carefully on their good practice visits and are of the mindset that change is needed, and urgently, the difference in the quality of teaching and pupils' progress is marked. This is most notable in mathematics. Mathematics teaching, at its best, is responsive to pupils' needs so that lessons are adapted as they progress to unpick an emerging misconception or introduce a

further layer of challenge. Typically, work in this subject is focused on the quick application of taught skills and pupils themselves are noticing the difference. As one pupil commented to the inspector, 'We don't spend long practising calculations we can already do anymore… we are expected to use what we know to solve problems and challenges'. This change in approach has led to an accelerated rate of progress and pupils are catching up quickly on the lost ground of previous years.

Teaching in other subjects, particularly English, has not improved as quickly. Assessment information is not analysed with the same detail to target teaching more closely towards pupils' gaps in understanding. Teachers themselves are not always clear on the purpose of their lesson so that pupils become confused about what they are learning. Too many pupils receive work of the same level of difficulty despite being of different abilities. This limits their progress as they either struggle with concepts they do not understand or finish quickly because not enough is demanded of them. Across the school, there is a lack of understanding about how to cater for the different needs of pupils. While planning now identifies disadvantaged pupils, so that they are known to staff, lessons are not tailored to ensure that these pupils make greater gains in their learning. The most-able pupils, other than in mathematics, remain overlooked by staff so they go unchallenged and, consequently, make slower progress than their peers.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' social skills are stronger than their behaviours for learning. When tasks are too easy, some pupils are happy to sit unoccupied while they wait for others to catch up or their teacher to give them an extension task. Conversely, when tasks are too difficult, pupils switch off from their learning and find other, less productive, activities to occupy their time, such as talking to their friends. Leaders acknowledge that this is aligned to the overall quality of teaching. A greater focus on raising the aspirations and ambitions of pupils, particularly in Year 8, is needed if they are to transfer successfully to high school and achieve their full potential.

Pupils bristle with pride when they receive specific praise from staff about the quality of their work. Pupils told the inspector that they particularly like the acknowledgements they receive in assembly, such as for good attendance, and it makes them try even harder to get to school each day and on time. This raised profile of good attendance and time-keeping has been effective in reducing absence across the school. Recent figures show that attendance is broadly average and improving. The work of the parent and pupil support partner is now focusing on those pupils and families with greater needs to ensure that they are equally well supported to attend regularly.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils are beginning to make better progress, although there remain considerable variations between key stages, subjects and pupil groups. This is linked, in part, to how readily staff have reflected on their practice and implemented their own learning from visiting other colleagues' classrooms.

Recent assessment information shows that pupils' achievement in mathematics is improving quickly due to a better quality and consistency of teaching. The progress of disadvantaged pupils is also improving, albeit slowly. While most staff acknowledge who these pupils are in their planning, few make adaptations to their lessons to meet their needs; consequently, pupils are not always stretched to reach their full potential.

Outcomes in Year 6 and Key Stage 3 are more positive than those in Year 5 due to targeted teaching of these year groups by heads of department. Year 5 pupils are not receiving the attention needed to ensure a stronger start and a smoother transition between the lower and upper school. Leaders are storing up difficulties for the future if attentions do not shift to the younger age groups.

Outcomes in writing remain a concern, with standards of work and rates of progress falling way below the school's targets at its latest checkpoint. While pupils are becoming more effective at spotting different elements of grammar or punctuation, they do not get the opportunity, unlike in mathematics, to use their knowledge for a real purpose. As such, pupils' compositions are not of the quality needed to raise their overall competence and reach at least what is expected for their age. Too many teachers, outside of the English department, do not see it as their business to contribute to pupils' written communication. Some teachers do not implement the strategies they have been shown through training to improve pupils' writing at a quick enough rate.

External support

Senior leaders have been reliant on the support of external consultants and an NLE to get the school moving in the right direction. Nonetheless, an effective improvement plan is now in place and the effective partnership working with Ponteland Middle School, a national support school with a NLE at the helm, is beginning to improve the quality of teaching. Advice around appraisal systems, the evaluation of assessment data and the joint visits made by staff to each other's classrooms have all been undertaken quickly over the last two-and-a-half months. Staff are relishing the opportunity to access this kind of training; something they have not had access to in the past. Leaders now need to focus, in their last term as acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher, on monitoring the impact of this heavy investment so that maximum benefit is gained for pupils.