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20 May 2011

Mr J Hallworth
Executive Headteacher
Washington School
Spout Lane
Washington
Tyne and Wear
NE37 2AA

Dear Mr Hallworth

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Washington School

Following my visit with Lynne Selkirk, additional inspector, to your school on 18 and 19 May 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures, following the inspection which took place in June 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement, which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Sunderland.

Yours sincerely

Mr Brian Blake
Her Majesty's Inspector

January 2011



Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2010

- Improve the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress by:
 - eradicating inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and ensuring that teachers always have high expectations of students
 - consistently using assessment and information about students' prior learning to plan work that meets the learning needs of all, particularly the most able
 - ensuring that lessons provide interesting, varied tasks that challenge all students
 - sharing the good practice clearly evident in school
 - ensuring that the behaviour management policy is consistently and fairly applied so boundaries and expectations of students and staff are clear.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - holding middle managers more fully to account for the effective use of assessment information in their areas of responsibility
 - increasing middle managers' role in monitoring the impact of teaching by observing lessons and by reviewing planning and its impact on students' progress
 - reducing staff absence to a minimum
 - developing additional strategies to increase students' attendance rates and to reduce the number of days lost to fixed-period exclusions.

Special measures: monitoring of Washington School

Report from the second monitoring inspection from 18 to 19 May 2011

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work, including 15 part lessons. A range of documents was scrutinised and meetings were held with members of the senior management team and the Chair of the Governing Body. Further discussions were held with a number of staff, a group of nominated students and senior officers from the local authority. Inspectors also spoke with a significant number of students during lessons, at breaks and lunchtimes over the two days.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection in January 2010, some significant staff changes have taken place within the school. The substantive headteacher is on long-term sick leave and has been replaced by an executive headteacher, seconded on a part-time basis from another secondary school in the same local authority. One deputy headteacher and one full-time member of staff have left the school, five long-term staff absentees have returned to work and two long-term supply teachers have been replaced. The school continues to suffer from a higher-than-average rate of staff absence. Two new parent governors and one staff governor have joined the governing body, leaving one staff vacancy.

Students' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The students' attainment and their overall achievement are improving slowly. The latest school-generated data indicate that the school will make some modest but important improvements on the 2010 results, especially in increasing the percentage of students gaining five or more good GCSEs, including English and mathematics.

The progress of students in lessons is better now than at the time of the previous monitoring inspection. This is the result of two targeted actions. First, there are now generally improved standards of behaviour, which means that many more students than previously seen have a more-positive attitude to their learning. Second, there is a more-consistent quality of satisfactory or better teaching across the school. However, the progress of all ability groups is not even and those who start at the school in Year 7 with above average attainment in the two core subjects of English and mathematics are making slower progress relative to this start point than other ability groups. The progress of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities follows a similar pattern to that seen in the rest of the school.

Other relevant student outcomes

The behaviour of students is improving and, as a result, has made a significant contribution to the 50% reduction in the number of exclusions over the past year. However, there remains a small minority whose attitudes and general demeanour in and around the school, in particular towards teachers and peers in lessons, continues to affect their own and others' learning. The school is continuing to make ongoing progress in improving the overall rate of attendance, with improvements across all year groups in comparison with last year and the current overall figure is now in line with the national average. The most significant improvement is seen in Year 11, where there has been an improvement of almost 3.5% over the past year, and it is now just below average.

The effectiveness of provision

The overall quality of teaching is improving. The quality of teachers' planning continues to improve also, but inconsistencies remain across the school because some still focuses too much on tasks to be completed rather than clearly identified learning outcomes. A lot of planning also lacks clearly identified strategies to engage students of all abilities in work that challenges them to learn in line with their known capabilities. There has been a greater consistency and sharing of students' performance data with teachers but, as yet, the extent to which these are used to inform lesson planning remains too variable across the school.

In those lessons where teaching is most effective, activities are carefully planned to engage all students in their learning, and creative strategies are used to ensure that those identified with weak literacy skills are supported effectively by continuous reinforcement of 'key words'. In too many lessons, however, there is still too much teacher talk and direction, with too few opportunities for the students to share and explore their own ideas. This style of teaching limits the opportunities for open class discussion and tends to suppress the development of refined and attuned listening skills, which are used by the students to share their personal views and thoughts about an issue or topic in a way that characterises independent learning. In some lessons, the students are involved in the assessment of their own and others' work, but this is underdeveloped across the school. Teachers' marking and the quality of feedback are also too variable in quality across the school, in particular in challenging poorly presented work. Where these are good, the students know exactly how well they have done and what else they need to do to make their work better. Although there is now a greater consistency in managing students' behaviour than seen previously, a small number of teachers still lack effective strategies for dealing with challenging behaviour in lessons. This poor behaviour is still most evident in the disrespectful manner shown towards teachers and other students. Despite this, those students who spoke with inspectors are confident that behaviour is improving because teachers are tackling it more effectively than they have done in the past.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the area for improvement:

- improve the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress – satisfactory

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The effectiveness of the school in addressing weaknesses in leadership and management is beginning to gain momentum. There are plans for proposed changes to the overall structure of senior leaders and managers, with redefined roles and responsibilities, which are well advanced and have been formally approved by the governing body. Previous ambiguity in management roles and insufficient accountability are now being addressed and are helping to ensure a greater coherence and shared sense of collaborative responsibility to tackle identified weaknesses, especially in teaching and learning, use of assessment information and poor behaviour. Middle managers are also beginning to develop a more-robust approach to assessing the quality of the teaching in terms of its impact on students' attainment, progress and behaviour in lessons. These improvements are helping, albeit slowly, to raise the levels of students' aspirations in order that they achieve better outcomes.

The school now has an accurate overview of the quality of teaching. There are clear structures in place to challenge and support weaker teachers, in addition to developing the practice of all staff. A 'teaching and learning' group is driving a focused development programme throughout the school and there is a renewed energy as staff are beginning to engage more effectively in professional dialogue and share best practice. Many teachers are more-reflective practitioners as a result of these recent developments and most can accurately assess how they could improve their teaching so that it has a greater impact on the students' learning.

The governing body continues to develop its range of evaluation and monitoring roles, including more-regular meetings between nominated governors and senior/middle managers. The governing body now has a good overview of the strengths and areas of weaknesses, with a shared sense of common purpose and direction when working with the local authority and senior leaders and managers within the school. The school's specialist technology status does not yet make sufficient impact on either teaching or attainment, with current levels in the subject still too low.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the area for improvement:

- improve leadership and management –satisfactory

External support

The overall quality of the local authority's support for the school remains good. There is regular ongoing contact between nominated local authority officers and senior leaders and managers, including the governing body. Recent reviews of the school's quality of provision have helped keep the focus on tackling areas of weakness, especially in teaching, learning and behaviour. Further targeted support in improving attendance and behaviour are well focused on the essential ongoing improvements needed across the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Give a greater emphasis to improving the overall quality of presentation of students' work by devising and implementing a whole-school strategy that ensures all teachers and students know, understand and commit to better quality.