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17 October 2012

Mr Douglas Blackledge
Principal
Furness Academy
Thornccliffe Road
Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria
LA14 5QP

Dear Mr Blackledge

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Furness Academy

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy on 16 October 2012, and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks also to the Chair of the Governing Body and students for making time to speak with me.

Since the previous inspection, the subject leader for mathematics has left the academy and there have been a number of further staff changes within that department. An interim subject leader has been appointed along with two assistant leaders who each hold responsibilities at one of the two academy sites. A recruitment process is underway to appoint a substantive subject leader for mathematics. The roles of senior leaders have been restructured to check students' performance more closely, particularly in mathematics and English. A number of new governors have been elected to the governing body and a new Chair was appointed from September 2012. Academy leaders are currently managing an additional staffing re-structure in preparation for the move to the new academy building, scheduled, at present, to open in September 2013.

As a result of the inspection on 25 January 2012, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The proportion of Year 11 students who gained five A* to C GCSE passes including English and mathematics in this summer's examinations fell short of the minimum floor standard for attainment set by the government. Academy leaders acknowledge that Year 11 students of different abilities did not achieve well enough in mathematics. This reflects a sustained period when teaching did not meet students' needs and resulted in significant gaps in their mathematical knowledge and skills. Results in other subjects were more positive. For example, GCSE results in English were much closer to the levels expected of all students

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

nationally and students achieved particularly well in some subjects, including science and information and communication technology.

Leaders have overhauled the way in which assessment information is gathered and analysed in mathematics. A reliable baseline of students' attainment has been established from which to measure progress. This has provided a much more accurate view of the progress being made by different groups of students. While there is some evidence to show that students are beginning to make better progress in mathematics, data reveal that significant areas of underachievement remain, particularly in Key Stage 4. Consequently, steps are being taken urgently to close gaps in learning in mathematics, for example, through booster classes, and improvements made in the quality of teaching.

The quality of teaching has improved since the previous inspection and inadequate teaching has been tackled decisively. For example, support provided by the University of Cumbria, one of the academy's sponsors, has enabled mathematics teachers to work together to develop planning that includes more varied activities. Opportunities to 'team teach' have also strengthened teachers' confidence to take more risks in their practice. The positive impact of this work was evident in the eight lessons observed where students were actively engaged in practical tasks that included opportunities for paired work and discussion. Students who were interviewed reported that mathematics lessons are more interesting and that they particularly enjoy problem solving when the opportunity arises. However, while planning makes reference to students' different abilities, activities are not always pitched well enough to ensure that they are suitably challenging for all. At times, teachers' explanations do not provide clear links between tasks. As a result, students do not always make the connections needed to deepen their understanding of mathematical concepts.

A sample of students' workbooks indicates that teachers have raised their expectations of students and that more attention is paid to presenting work accurately and neatly. Written feedback to students has also improved and follows a consistent format across the department. Teachers' comments identify what students have done well and what might be improved although the quality of guidance about next steps to improve is variable. In the best examples seen, students responded to an extra challenge set by the teacher as a next step for learning and added their own comments about how they might improve their work. However, this was not consistent across all teaching groups.

Students recognise that the profile of mathematics is being raised across the academy, for example, through assemblies. Those interviewed could provide examples of the value of mathematics in other subjects through the direct links made by teachers in different subject areas including science and physical education. Younger students reported that they enjoy 'sand box' activities that allow them to practise basic numeracy skills during learning group sessions.

Behaviour management strategies have been strengthened across the academy and students like the rewards that can be gained through regular attendance and good effort.

Students report that behaviour has improved because expectations of them, both in lessons and around the academy, have been raised. However, they highlighted that behaviour is not always as good where teachers do not follow the behaviour code consistently. Behaviour around the academy is generally orderly although students noted that there are still occasional disruptions to their lessons during the split lunchtime. Younger students appreciate the presence of staff on the busiest corridors as some congested areas around the academy are difficult to walk through at times. Students' attendance has continued to improve and is broadly similar to the national average. This reflects the academy's continuing drive to ensure that all students attend regularly and a general increase in students' interest in their learning as a result of better teaching.

Academy leaders have a much better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in mathematics teaching and progress made by students. This is due to the changes to the way in which performance in mathematics is checked by senior leaders and through the additional support from a specialist mathematics consultant who has worked with the interim subject leaders and teachers in mathematics to improve the quality of teaching as well as support leadership development. The Principal has acted decisively to remove barriers to progress. Teachers in the mathematics department recognise that there has been a need for change and are working together much more closely as a team. They have appreciated the support from senior leaders during a period when they have been developing new ways of working. Mathematics staff have also valued the opportunity to share good practice although this has been limited at times due to being located on different sites.

The Principal has a very clear view of the next steps that are needed to speed up the rate of progress further. The academy improvement plan and associated statement of action include many appropriate actions to respond to the identified areas for improvement. However, leaders recognise the need to prioritise these actions and to identify measurable checks of progress made in the short and medium term towards meeting success criteria. The governing body has been strengthened through the appointment of additional governors and have identified where further training is needed to enable them to hold academy leaders to account for students' performance.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your academy. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2012.

- Improve students' attainment and accelerate the progress they make in mathematics by:
 - improving the quality of teaching in mathematics by July 2012 so that no inadequate teaching remains and increasing the proportion of good teaching
 - strengthening monitoring of teaching, learning and students' work in mathematics so that weaknesses and inconsistencies are identified and tackled quickly
 - increasing teachers' expectations of what students can achieve in mathematics lessons and of how they present their work
 - ensuring that data are better used in lesson planning to ensure that all students, including the more able, are routinely set work that matches their abilities
 - strengthening students' basic skills in mathematics and enabling the greater and more frequent application of these skills in other subjects
 - raise the profile of mathematics across the curriculum and the academy, for example, through relevant displays
 - ensuring that all staff in the mathematics department have access to relevant training.

- Sustain the improvement already made in students' behaviour by:
 - strengthening supervision procedures during split lunchtimes to prevent disruption to classes
 - providing a better balance between rewards and sanctions
 - further reducing temporary exclusions.

- Improve the consistency of how policies are applied across the academy, for example, in the setting of homework, how the performance of staff is monitored and how 'learning groups' are used to raise achievement.