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Mr Gerard Lonergan
Headteacher
Gateacre Community Comprehensive School
Hedgefield Road
Liverpool
Merseyside
L25 2RW

Dear Mr Lonergan

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to Gateacre Community Comprehensive School

Following my visit to your school on 15 March 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, other senior leaders and heads of department, the Chair of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and students. The school's action plan was evaluated. I visited some lessons during a tour of the school and scrutinised a range of documentation including minutes of meetings of the 'Challenge Board', set up by the local authority to help the school to improve. I also studied a review of the sixth form undertaken by the local authority since the previous inspection. In addition, I examined a sample of students' work in English and mathematics.

Context

Since the previous inspection, roles in the senior leadership team have been changed so that there are clearer lines of accountability in tackling the areas for improvement identified in the report.

Main findings

The governing body, school leaders and staff were disappointed, but not surprised, by the judgement at the previous inspection. There is a shared acknowledgement across the school that students' achievement requires further improvement. School leaders were heartened that inspectors found the quality of teaching to be good, as a great deal of effort had been put into improving this key area of the school's work. School leaders feel that there is now a strong basis for rapid improvement.

Since the previous inspection, a sharply focused action plan has been put together to turn the school around. It is well-targeted at the correct priorities. Nevertheless, this plan requires further refinement because it is not always clear who is responsible for checking that actions are leading to improvement. The plan also needs to identify more outcomes that are measurable and that have clear timescales, so that the school can regularly check its progress in meeting targets for improvement.

Senior leaders have introduced a much better system to track students' progress. Teachers now have the information they need to provide support so that students do not underachieve. This system is promising, but as it is at the early stages of development it is too early to see whether it is having the desired impact.

There are still pockets of poor practice which remain a barrier to improvement. Some staff feel justifiably frustrated that policies are not always applied by all teachers, and that this is one factor standing in the way of Gateacre quickly becoming a good school. For example, excellent marking in English is driving up standards because teachers give clear advice to students on how to improve their work. Teachers in this department follow the school's agreed marking policy; students' work is marked regularly and thoroughly, with thoughtful and precise comments that help students to understand the next steps in their learning. By contrast, weaker teaching in mathematics is being compounded by very poor quality marking which is leading to some students still underachieving.

The senior leadership team acted swiftly in inviting the local authority to undertake a review of the sixth form, shortly after the inspection. The findings provided a clear steer on how to improve the sixth form and recommendations have been incorporated into the school's action plan. The school has already acted on advice and sixth form students have noticed; as one student commented: 'Teachers ask our opinions more now and work is marked more regularly'.

Following the inspection, governors have restructured meetings so that there is now a more intensive focus on students' progress. Governors are involved in the monthly 'Challenge Board' meetings with senior leaders and local authority representatives. This is helping governors to keep abreast of developments. In turn, such involvement is increasing governors' confidence in holding the school to account. The Chair of the governing body realises that governors have a crucial role to play in making sure the school moves forward. He now recognises the need to ask much more searching questions of school leaders regarding students' performance.

Senior leaders and governors have begun to take effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- increase the intensity and regularity of procedures to check up on students' progress so that action can be taken even more rapidly to stop students underachieving
- develop a programme to rapidly improve the quality of teaching and marking in mathematics so that students do not underachieve in this subject
- immediately increase targets for more able students, as these remain too easy at present
- refine the action plan so that it includes more measurable outcomes with clear deadlines, stating unequivocally who is responsible for checking that the school is on track to meet its targets for improvement
- increase the role of the governing body in making sure that the school is improving at a fast enough pace
- make sure all staff follow the school's policies

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The school has the benefit of intensive challenge and support from the local authority. A carefully structured programme has immediately been implemented involving monthly 'Challenge Board' meetings, a review of the sixth form and support for middle leaders. This has already led to improvements, for example in sixth form teaching. The local authority has forged links with some high performing schools to support Gateacre, for example in the effective use of information on student progress. The local authority takes an uncompromising attitude and is determined to make sure that Gateacre improves quickly. As one representative put it, during my visit: it is 'all hands to the pump' to make Gateacre a good school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Liverpool and as below.

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant

Her Majesty's Inspector