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Mr J Gannon
Headteacher
Hope Academy
Ashton Road
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Merseyside
WA12 0AQ

Dear Mr Gannon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hope Academy, St. Helens

Following my visit to your school on 13 and 14 November 2013 with David Selby, Her Majesty's Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the sponsors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The school should take immediate action to:

- ensure that all data about students' learning and progress are accurate
- improve attendance, particularly for those students who are supported by Pupil Premium funding
- ensure that governors have a secure understanding of school performance data
- eradicate inadequate teaching
- strategically monitor the consistency of progress made by different groups of students in order to raise standards urgently
- ensure that leaders at all levels adhere to school policies and procedures.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, students, members of the Governing Body, a representative of the local authority and representatives of the sponsor to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. Lesson observations took place alongside a number of short visits to lessons. Inspectors scrutinised students' work, and the school's records of monitoring activities.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit you have appointed two additional Vice Principals to lead teaching, learning and achievement and an Assistant Principal to oversee transition and marketing. A new data manager and an inclusion manager have also been appointed. A lead practitioner for mathematics has been appointed alongside a middle leader for teaching and learning. A new head of science and technology has been appointed and will start in January 2014.

Main findings

Since my last visit you have made some significant changes to staffing to ensure that the school is better placed to deal with the challenges it is facing. However, most of these appointments are relatively recent and therefore it is too soon to evaluate the impact of their work on improving outcomes for students. The pace of change to date has been too slow to make any inroads to reducing the significant deficit of underachievement inherited from the two predecessor schools.

Examination results for Key Stage 4 in 2013 show that the school's predictions were not realised. At the time of the last inspection you and your team predicted that 60 per cent of students would achieve five good GCSE passes including English and mathematics. However, results fell significantly short of this prediction by nine percentage points. This is partly because data provided to senior leaders about students' progress are unreliable. Some work in books is unmarked and some is marked inaccurately. Whilst students made better progress in English than in previous years, their achievement remains weak across a range of subjects. Students continue to underachieve in the sixth form.

There are a number of groups of students in school whose achievement requires improvement or is inadequate due to the poor quality of teaching they receive. These groups include those who are disabled or have special educational needs, the most able and those for whom the pupil premium provides support. A key barrier in raising achievement for students who are supported by pupil premium funding is that their attendance is low and has fallen further from last year. In a typical week, approximately 40 students eligible for the pupil premium do not attend school and are consequently missing out on their learning

Students made inadequate progress in a number of lessons observed by inspectors because learning activities were not designed to meet their individual needs; for some students the work was too easy and for others too difficult. In some lessons those who are disabled or have special educational needs made inadequate progress because teachers did not use information provided by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator to support their individual literacy needs.

Students observed by inspectors behaved well at lunch and break times; they were typically considerate and polite. However, some students felt that day to day behaviour was not good and included fights and pushing on the stairs, corridors and on the school buses. Some students reported that the 'one way' system to ease congestion is not always adhered to, so moving between lessons can be difficult. Many of the students spoken to by inspectors and those who completed the anti-bullying survey felt that they would be well supported by their Head of Year if there was a problem; they feel well supported by learning support assistants and learning mentors.

Behaviour in lessons varies from good to inadequate. The quality of teaching in lessons where the class teacher is absent was found to be weak. This is because middle leaders do not check thoroughly the quality and appropriateness of the work set. Provision for those who are taken out of their timetabled lessons due to poor behaviour is weak. This is because the work provided for them is inappropriate for their ability and much of the work is unmarked. Some students spend a number of days in internal exclusion and make very little progress.

Senior leaders have an over-generous view of the quality of teaching because lesson observations do not focus enough on the progress of all pupils. Teachers' poor performance is being tackled but there remains too much poor practice in teaching. Some middle leaders do not follow the school's procedures for marking and the management of behaviour and are therefore not in a strong position to hold members of staff in their department to account.

Governors do not have a secure understanding of performance data so they are unable to rigorously challenge senior leaders. There is however some strong educational expertise on the governing body but it is not used to good effect. The governors have not had a review of governance as was recommended at the Section 5 inspection. However, they have made links with a National Leader of Governance.

Sponsors accept that standards in school are poor and they are rightly concerned that students' achievement is not improving quickly enough. As a result, governors, supported by the sponsors, have established a monitoring group that met for the first time very recently. This group aims to keep a close eye on standards across the school and report back directly to the sponsors, thus improving lines of accountability.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority has engaged the school in a task group to raise standards in all local secondary schools. The local authority has also brokered a consultant to look at key processes within school; this has had very little impact on raising standards. You are working in partnership with a local secondary school to improve professional development, training and support. The local authority has provided support around anti-bullying to some good effect.

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

Yours sincerely

Sally Kenyon

Her Majesty's Inspector