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Mr Matthew Bowler
Headteacher
Longdendale High School
Spring Street
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Dear Mr Bowler

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Longdendale High School, Tameside

Following my visit to your school on 19 November 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 September 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- sharpen the success criteria within action plans so that the impact of actions taken might more readily be gauged
- improve teachers' day-to-day lesson planning so that it captures clearly what students, and particular groups of students, will learn in each lesson to support good progression over time
- ensure that monitoring activities, and the feedback subsequently provided to staff, focus on the most important features of teaching and learning in each subject.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders on their areas of responsibility, subject leaders, and members of the Governing Body to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school's action plans were evaluated. I attended part of the school's regular meeting of the leaders of English, mathematics, science, the humanities and modern languages. I observed parts of 12 lessons, some jointly with a deputy headteacher, and scrutinised a range of documents. I talked with students during their break and lunch times as well as talking to them about their learning in lessons.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection in September 2013, a new head of mathematics has been appointed, stepping into the role in early November.

Main findings

The section 5 inspection judgement that the school requires improvement has led to a gear change in its efforts to get to good quickly. Central to this has been a restructuring of the senior leadership team so that responsibilities are clearly focused on the areas that need improving: teaching, achievement and subject leadership. The deputy headteachers' roles now concentrate on teaching, the curriculum, and the progress of all students. The importance of the contribution of subject and pastoral leaders in driving improvement has been emphasised through higher expectations of them: they are being held to account, and in turn are expected to challenge and support their teams. At this stage, however, departmental teams of staff have varying levels of skills and experience. Some are affected by teachers' absences and not all have a strong contingent of highly effective practitioners.

The school's systems for monitoring its work are suitably robust and the outcomes are analysed and acted upon. Indeed, the interim evaluations of the action plan show where planned actions have been modified or new actions introduced in response to the findings. The outcomes from a range of activities to monitor teaching are carefully triangulated in reaching judgements on teaching. However, senior and subject leaders are often missing out those important aspects of the subject that help to improve teaching and learning. For example in mathematics, does the teacher's approach ensure the students understand the concept and link it to earlier learning in that topic, or is the emphasis on how to carry out a particular method. When scrutinising students' work, leaders have given much attention to strengthening teachers' marking and guidance to students on how to improve. However, the opportunity is being missed to check at the same time that all students are covering the curriculum as expected, are suitably challenged and are having opportunities to solve problems and work independently. The next step is about honing the school's systems, not replacing them. Likewise, sharpening the success criteria should help the school to be precise about the impact of actions taken and aid its reporting to governors.

Hard-won gains have been made in attendance and reductions in persistent absence. Students talked about improvements in behaviour this term but also that teachers are still inconsistent in the way they manage behaviour and apply the school's policy. Low-level chatter and students' half-hearted efforts were evident in some lessons where teaching required improvement. Such attitudes to learning may not fall foul of the school's behaviour policy but are an impediment to the progress of the students in those classes. The school might usefully emphasise positive, cooperative attitudes to learning as part of its definition of good behaviour.

Governors are on the ball: the Governing Body comprises a knowledgeable group of people who ask the right questions of leaders at all levels. They understand that two significant barriers to the school being judged good are students' unsatisfactory achievement in mathematics and the slower progress and lower attainment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In mathematics, the new head of department has acted quickly to support staff by creating a Year 11 scheme of work. The achievement of students who are eligible for pupil premium funding is tracked very carefully but there is scope for the school to be

even more proactive in promoting the good achievement of these students as well as intervening to help them catch up with their peers.

Work to improve the quality of teaching has proceeded at a good pace. Staff have been keen to participate in the activities provided and the sharing of good practice. The emphasis on assessment techniques, such as questioning and marking, has had a positive impact. Day-to-day lesson planning, however, while manageable, often lacks sharp attention to what gains students will make in knowledge, skills and understanding in that lesson and how this connects to earlier and future learning.

Each teacher whose teaching requires improvement is supported through an individual action plan. At the same time, 12 highly effective teachers have taken on the role of 'professional advocates' and are being trained in coaching and mentoring techniques. They have already led a successful training session for all staff. The school's programme for newly qualified teachers is recognised as good practice by the local authority.

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 recently agreed to carry out a review of the school's work in mathematics and science: this needs to be carried out soon. It has also agreed to provide training to support the development of middle leaders' skills. The school has drawn on a newly established school-to-school support arrangement but this proved less than successful. In future, the school should discuss in some depth the nature of the intended input to ensure that it reflects best practice and is well pitched to the schools' needs.

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

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector