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Mrs Julie Johnson
Headteacher
Penkford School
Wharf Road
Newton-le-Willows
Merseyside
WA12 9XZ

Dear Mrs Johnson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Penkford School, St. Helens

Following my visit to your school on 22 November 2013, 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 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.

Evidence

Meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, staff with extra responsibilities (middle leaders), members of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated.

Context

A new deputy headteacher was appointed on 1 November 2013. An early release from his previous school was negotiated to allow him to begin his new role with immediate effect.

Main findings

Senior leaders and governors are acting decisively to improve the school. The school's action plan is succinct and focused on each of the three issues identified by the section 5 inspection. It is a plan of high quality with precisely-formulated actions, timescales, and criteria for success. Those responsible for the actions and for checking their effectiveness are clearly identified.

Senior staff have appropriate experience to take the school to good and beyond. The headteacher, a year into post at the school, has mainstream secondary experience and brings to the school mainstream expectations of what students should achieve. She has also taken a special school of the same designation out of special measures. The new deputy joins from an outstanding special school in a different local authority.

Leadership roles are being shared more widely. A team of middle leaders has been given responsibility for driving improvement in students' achievement. The basic premise is that if students are achieving well at the school, attendance will improve because they want to be there. A better balance between nurture and learning is being sought, with a much greater emphasis on learning and the gaining of appropriate qualifications. The students' acquisition of core skills at a good functional level is central to the changes, along with improved assessment and rigorous planning of personalised programmes of learning. Preparation for life beyond school, including preparation for work, is seen as an important driver. Already, signs of higher expectations are evident. This year, for the first time, the school opened when the GCSE results were published and leavers celebrated as many secondary schools do, by staging a Prom night. Displays around school, an area identified in the section 5 inspection report for improvement, now celebrate students' achievement. Some of these are considerable, such as that of one student who won a national competition against stiff odds and succeeded in reaching base camp on Everest.

A good start to improving behaviour and its management has been made by the new deputy. School policies for behaviour and physical intervention have been developed collaboratively. A staged response to inappropriate behaviours is planned and the most difficult stage, that of defining the boundary of what is not acceptable, has been tackled first with significant success. Students are said to accept sanctions and are motivated to avoid them by making the right choices. A new recording system for behaviour is under development, to provide teachers and senior leaders with data to support the monitoring of behaviour, promote accountability and underpin further actions. An approach to rewards for good behaviour has been decided. A local authority counselling service has been engaged to provide emotional support for students. The school has also widened its reach to include greater involvement in family support for the parents of the students.

The increasing effectiveness of the Governing Body, noted in the section 5 report, continues to build. All but one position of the 12 available on the Governing Body has been filled. Governors are equipped with a highly relevant set of skills, first-hand experience of young people with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties and showed a good knowledge of the current position of the school. They have a shared commitment to improvement and work closely with 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

External support is provided by a school improvement partner who is the headteacher of an outstanding special school of the same designation as Penkford. In addition, the local authority is providing support for the development of data and tracking tools and, through the school's adviser, external evaluation for the success of actions taken to improve, for example, governance. Although the local authority is monitoring the school's progress, it sees no likely further hindrance to the school's continued improvement. However, the headteacher expressed concern about the impact of an uneven distribution of pupils in different years, with few pupils in Key Stage 2, one or two in Years 7 and 8 and the bulk of students admitted in Years 9 and 10. The concern is that in 2014 – 15, the school will feel like a school for Key Stage 4 students with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. The question whether this will provide a suitable learning environment for a small number of younger pupils then arises. The local authority should give urgent consideration to this admission issue.

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

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett

Her Majesty's Inspector