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Dr Rowena Blencowe
Headteacher
Trentham High School
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Dear Dr Blencowe

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Trentham High School

Following my visit to your school on 11 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's most recent monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged as having serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in June 2013. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Corporate Director of People Services for Stoke on Trent.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Limm

Additional Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2013

- Improve teaching so that it is good or better across all subjects, including in English, mathematics, science, and modern foreign languages, in order to raise achievement, especially for girls, middle-ability students and those known to be eligible for support through the pupil premium, by:
 - improving the use of assessment in the planning and teaching of lessons in order to provide the right level of challenge for all students
 - ensuring that marking and in particular written feedback to students always enable them to know precisely what they must do to improve their work
 - improving students' participation in lessons by giving more opportunities for students to work and learn independently rather than being passive in lessons.

- Improve the attendance of those students who do not come to school as regularly as they should by making better use of incentives and challenging parents whose children are persistently absent from school.

- Improve leadership and management at all levels by ensuring that:-
 - governors make full use of the detailed information available to them about the work of the school to hold school leaders accountable with the utmost rigour for the school's performance
 - middle leaders consistently drive improvements in their subjects and other areas of responsibility so that standards, particularly of teaching and attainment, improve rapidly.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 11 March 2014

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, Chair of the Governing Body, members of the senior leadership team, a group of middle leaders, a representative of the local authority and a group of students. The inspector observed five lessons.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit one member of staff has left and been replaced by another on a temporary contract. Three new governors have been appointed.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher and senior leaders have continued to consolidate the initiatives which they had begun to introduce at the time of the previous monitoring inspection. They provide the staff with strong and incisive leadership, matched with high expectations and rigour in holding them to account. Middle leaders said that there is a clear sense of direction and that they have strengthened their roles by developing further their skills of interpreting assessment information and sharpening their departmental self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. The school's central data tracking is now more rigorous and is used more accurately by staff to assess the abilities of students and to track their progress more tightly so that any extra support for individual students can be provided quickly.

The emphasis on improving the quality of teaching and learning means that students are making better progress in the core subjects. The process by which teachers make predictions of future grades has been tightened up and targets for student attainment and progress are more realistic. School data on the regular assessment of students' work and the results of internal mock examinations in Years 10 and 11 demonstrate clearly that students are making much better progress in English and mathematics than they were this time last year. Students in receipt of pupil premium funding (additional government funding for disadvantaged students), are still not making the progress that other students are making. The school has now begun to focus on improving attainment and achievement during Key Stage 3.

Senior leaders are monitoring the quality of teaching closely and they regularly make short visits to lessons. They have developed a detailed and rigorous set of criteria for judging the quality of lessons. The judgements of the senior team on the quality of teaching jointly observed on the monitoring inspection agreed with those of the inspector.

The governing body has been strengthened since the previous monitoring visit and it now has a good range of skills and expertise to improve still further its capacity to hold the school to account for its performance. Governors are developing their link roles well and are in a much better position to understand, and interrogate, reports made by middle managers at meetings of the governing body.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Lesson-planning has been strengthened by making it clearer which students require extra support to overcome learning difficulties or which need to be challenged further with more difficult work. Some plans identify how these students will be supported in their learning, but this is not the case in all instances.
- The school's marking policy is being embedded well so that all books and folders now have target stickers on their front covers indicating target grades to be achieved. At regular interviews teachers make informative and helpful comments to which students are expected to respond, indicating how they intend to make suggested improvements. These student responses are rigorously followed up by teachers to ensure that improvements are made.
- There has been a very strong focus on improving attendance. Figures show significant signs of improvement and are now above average. Any absence is closely tracked and students are rewarded for good attendance. Persistent absences have also been reduced. Parents are kept well-informed about student attendance and the adverse impact of absence on achievement and progress.
- The monitoring of teaching and learning has been strengthened well by the introduction of individual improvement plans for teachers who require improvement. These plans link areas for development closely with training needs so that teachers are given good opportunities to improve their teaching.
- Teachers at all levels have been trained to share their good ideas and practices. They have been helped to interpret, and use more accurately, the wealth of assessment information now available for them to increase the rate of progress that students make. All teachers have this assessment information readily available in their classes.
- The management of behaviour in school is effective and students said that behaviour in and out of lessons is good. Students said they feel safe at the school.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teachers do not always probe students' understanding sufficiently with their questioning. They sometimes accept too readily the answers which are given and do not encourage students to provide deeper explanations to extend their thinking. Sometimes teachers provide students with answers before they have had time to think them out for themselves.
- Although students said they welcomed being able to write responses to teachers' feedback comments in their books, sometimes these students' comments are too basic and do not indicate whether they understand what is required of them, or what they will do to make improvements. This is also true of some students' comments where they have been asked to evaluate the work of their peers.
- Senior staff are fully aware of the need to focus on judging the quality of learning taking place in lessons which they observe, but the lesson observation sheets used for making these judgements contain too many details about what the teacher is doing and not what the students are doing as a consequence of the teaching.
- Teachers have up-to-date assessment information about their students, but do not always indicate clearly on their data grids and lesson plans how they are using this information to provide the best support and guidance for those who require it to make better progress.

External support

The school has brokered a number of good links with local schools to enable it to provide training and support for teachers who require improvement and for developing further those aspects of leadership and governance which were identified as areas for improvement in the section 5 inspection report. The local authority continues to support the school well and provides good financial support when the school seeks to boost the quality of its provision in key areas, such as improving the management of teaching and learning. The local authority also continues to provide the school with a good school improvement partner whose work supports school development well.