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Mr Derek Cogle
Headteacher
Atkinson House School
North Terrace
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Northumberland
NE23 7EB

Dear Mr Cogle

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Atkinson House School, Seghill, Northumberland

Following my visit to your school on 20 March 2014, 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 third monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 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:

- ensure that leaders and governors place a greater focus on the progress students make over time when assessing learning and when evaluating the quality and impact of teaching, including marking
- increase the impact of performance management by ensuring all staff have challenging targets for improving teaching and students' achievement
- work with the local authority to improve the attendance of a small number of students who are frequently absent from school

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and with other staff, including the attendance support officer. I also met with the school's improvement partner, with the Chair of the Governing Body and held a telephone conversation with the headteacher of Park View School. We also looked at performance management documentation and together scrutinised samples of students' work from across a range of subjects. I also observed parts of four lessons, and met with three students to discuss their experience of school. Students from Years 7 and 8 were not in school on the day of monitoring inspection.

Context

There have been no significant changes to staff or the school's organisation since the previous monitoring inspection. Although a new governor has been appointed to the governing body, the departure of another governor means there is a vacancy that is currently unfilled.

Main findings

Many aspects of the school's work continue to improve. Planning to include post-16 provision from September 2014 is well under way. The curriculum is now more appropriately matched to students' needs and aspirations and is enhanced by a number of trips and other enrichment activities, such as bush craft and mountain biking. Students say they like the rewards they can earn by demonstrating positive attitudes to learning, such as access to other activities. In some subjects, ICT is used to engage and motivate students, such as in science, where video clips, live data feeds and other resources help provide a positive context to learning. Your plans to further develop the curriculum rightly include ensuring a greater focus on students who need support with specific barriers to learning, such as weak literacy skills, or social, emotional and behavioural needs. Pupil premium funding is predominantly being used to mitigate the staffing costs of existing intervention strategies. However, at present, leaders and governors are unable to demonstrate fully the impact of this funding on students' achievement.

There remains some variability in the quality of teaching and its impact on learning. Across much of the vocational provision, students are helped to make good progress through the quality of the support they receive that helps them to be successful. This includes a strong focus on building learning on a series of short term goals and challenges. This was particularly evident in students' positive attitudes to learning and in the quality of their work in food technology, a subject in which there has been significant improvement since September. Similarly, in students' assessment files in construction, where progress is meticulously recorded by course tutors, there is good evidence of students' applying their literacy and numeracy skills well. However, in some other subjects, including in English and mathematics, students' progress is not always as rapid as this. This is because teaching does not build as well on students' previous learning. For example, there is sometimes too great a reliance on the use of simple tasks or worksheets, or teaching does not focus sufficiently on developing specific skills, such as improving handwriting or the quality of students' written responses, more systematically over time. In addition, some marking does not make clear to students what they need to do to improve, or pinpoint how teaching assistants or other adults can provide support.

All students now have targets that help them to catch up in their learning. Snapshots of attainment data are collected each term to help leaders and governors in judging the progress students make. However, this assessment data may not always provide a fully reliable picture of improvements in students' achievement. Samples of work we scrutinised during my visit illustrated this weakness. For one student, although assessment data suggested he had made good or even outstanding progress, evidence in the student's work indicated that his learning over time was not as strong as this. The governing body should be similarly cautious in coming to conclusions about improvements in achievement without also checking the quality of learning in students' work.

Actions taken to increase attendance continue to bring about improvement. Overall attendance is better than at the same time in each of the last two academic years, with more students coming to school more frequently. A new behaviour and attendance panel is enabling governors to support the school in understanding and challenging the reasons for absence, and this is a welcome development. However, despite these improvements, a small number of students are frequently absent from school. You have taken action to address this, including by providing a limited amount of home tuition where the capacity of school staff allows. However, the support provided in conjunction with the local authority has not been effective in resolving these issues more rapidly.

Although teaching is improving, there remains further work to do before it is consistently good. The work of the teaching and learning group is a positive step, and there is a commitment on the part of most staff to the need to improve practice. There is increasing evidence that lesson planning takes much greater account of students' starting points and gaps in their learning. However, more could be done to accelerate improvement and bring about greater consistency in the quality of students' learning across all their subjects. For example, the checks on teaching do not ensure that evidence from lesson observations are matched against evidence of students' learning over time, especially in their work. As a result, these checks may provide too rosy a view of the impact of teaching on students' learning. In addition, the points for improvement identified for teachers do not always pinpoint precisely which aspects of teaching need to be improved. There is similarly a need to ensure that targets set for staff as part of annual appraisal arrangements focus sharply on improvements to teaching and outcomes for students.

External support

Although still in its early stages, the link with Park View School has provided useful support, particularly for curriculum development. However, the support provided has not yet had time to have significant impact on improvements to teaching and this should be an urgent priority moving forward. The impact of support provided by the local authority has been most evident in securing effective governance. However, uncertainties over the numbers of students who might be admitted to the school have made leaders' forward planning difficult. This is because the number of students, particularly those currently in Year 6, whose needs would be met by the school and who are currently in other schools or alternative provision across Northumberland is unclear.

I will visit the school again in the summer term 2014. The visit will focus on evaluating students' progress both in lessons and over time, including through a detailed work scrutiny. I will also evaluate the impact of actions taken by the local authority in support of the school. I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

Yours sincerely

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector