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6 June 2014

Mrs C Robinson
Headteacher
The Dearne Advanced Learning Centre
Goldthorpe Road
Goldthorpe
Rotherham
South Yorkshire
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Dear Mrs Robinson

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of The Dearne Advanced Learning Centre

Following my visit with Tanya Harber Stuart Her Majesty's Inspector to your school on 5 June 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 and for allowing Debbie Clinton Her Majesty's Inspector to shadow the inspection.

The inspection was the third 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 Director of Children's Services for Barnsley.

Yours sincerely

Helen Lane
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching to at least good so that students are able to make consistently good progress and attainment rises in all subjects, by:
 - making certain that teachers use information about students' capabilities effectively so that students are given appropriately challenging work that interests and engages them in lessons
 - ensuring that teachers' expectations of students' capabilities are high
 - ensuring that teachers use questioning more effectively to check students' understanding and challenge their thinking
 - ensuring that marking and teachers' feedback to students help them understand how to improve their work and take the next steps towards meeting their targets
 - developing students' study skills so that they can work independently in lessons and be less reliant on guidance from the teacher.

- Leaders at all levels must take responsibility for moving the school forward by ensuring that:
 - those leaders who require help to fulfil their roles effectively have the skills needed to monitor and evaluate their area robustly
 - all staff take responsibility for improving students' literacy and numeracy skills
 - all staff demonstrate a consistent approach towards implementing whole-school policies.

- Insist that regular attendance from all students is the norm, by:
 - monitoring trends in the attendance of individuals and groups of students
 - working closely with students and families to overcome the barriers to full attendance.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 5 June 2014

Evidence

The inspectors met with the Principal, other senior and middle leaders, members of staff, members of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority. Documents provided by the school were evaluated. A learning walk was conducted during tutor time and 13 parts of lessons were observed during the inspection. Ten of these observations were carried out jointly with school leaders. The lesson observations focussed on the quality of teaching and learning and the impact of new school policies in the classroom.

Context

A new assistant Principal started at the school in April 2014.

The planned academy conversion is now unlikely to take place until September 2014 as a result of negotiations about the building contract.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leaders at all levels are now engaged in moving the school forward. The strong direction provided by the Principal, supported by senior leaders, is recognised by staff and governors. Faculty leaders, and staff, described the new ethos of high expectation and ambition for success which has been 'bought in to' by both staff and students. They said, 'great things' were happening in the school and that everyone knows what the policies and expectations are which, 'now need to be embedded and followed consistently'.

Faculty leadership is improving. The National Support School (NSS) has provided training, and the increased frequency with which faculty leaders meet each other and their line managers is driving improvement and increasing accountability. Faculty leaders take responsibility for their teams and are held accountable for teaching and learning, and student progress, by senior leaders in a regular and well-planned meeting cycle. Faculty leaders in turn hold their team members to account. Faculty leaders spoke highly of 'pledging', when they (and their teachers) were required to pledge each Year 11 student's progress in their subject. Faculty leaders monitor their faculty on a weekly basis and use the findings to improve teaching and learning and share good practice. Faculty team work is much more effective. Good practice is also shared between faculties. This networking is valued by staff.

There is a well-planned series of training events. These events focus on the areas for improvement. The impact of training is monitored. For example, training for the mathematics department was followed by an audit to investigate where teaching and learning had improved and where further action was required. As a result of this monitoring senior leaders have a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses in

teaching and learning and where more training is needed. Individual support programmes are provided for teachers whose practice is not yet good and these are having a positive impact on improving the day-to-day quality of teaching.

As a result of training and opportunities to observe good practice, both in the school and at the NSS, teaching and learning are improving. Both teachers and learners have higher expectations with students' targets based on making more than nationally expected progress. In lessons, when questioning is effective it encourages students to think deeply and give extended answers; however, the approach to questioning is not consistent with some teachers still accepting one-word answers. In some Year 9 mathematics and English lessons students were seen working without relying too much on the teacher's guidance. In a Year 9 English lesson students wrote diary entries for a female character from the book they were reading. Two boys, who read their diary entries aloud, showed great maturity and had written with considerable empathy for the character. Some teachers are now prepared to take risks in planning activities for lessons so that learners are more challenged and engaged by their learning.

Marking and feedback are improving. Books are now marked more frequently, although the use of the school's marking policy is inconsistent. When the policy is used well students are making responses to feedback which help them to improve their work and develop a deeper understanding. Staff say students value the better marking, which makes them feel as if they, and their work, are important.

Study skills are being improved in tutor time through the teaching of literacy and numeracy. The school has invested in a computer package which allows students to practise their academic work at home. There has been a literacy focus, which is having a positive impact in some lessons; however, not all teachers have the necessary knowledge and understanding to teach literacy skills effectively. There has been some development of numeracy across the curriculum.

Higher expectations and better teaching are leading to improved progress. Students in Year 11 are making better progress in both English and mathematics than students did in 2013. A greater proportion of students are making expected progress and more than expected progress in English and mathematics this year. The proportion of students gaining five grade A* to C including English and mathematics in their GCSE examinations should also be higher and above the government's floor target. The gap in attainment between the students who receive pupil premium funding and their peers is larger this year for the key measure of five grade A* to C including English and mathematics, however the gap in the expected progress in English and mathematics is closing. Although the attainment of both groups has risen, that of students supported by pupil premium funding has risen less than that of other students. The school's data at Key Stage 3 is not sufficiently reliable. In lessons observed in science and mathematics, progress in students' books did not match the data collected.

Students and teachers are taking more responsibility for each student's achievement as a result of progress weeks. During the week students collect their current level or grade from their subject teacher and record it on a card. These cards are then discussed with tutors. Consequently, students are engaged in one-to-one discussions about their progress and set their own targets for improvement. Parents are also involved in the process.

Highly effective systems to monitor attendance are having a positive impact. The attendance of all groups has improved, particularly that of pupil premium students. Attendance is now broadly in line with the national average. The attendance team works well with parents and use letters, attendance panels, phone calls and rewards to encourage good attendance. The improved attendance of Year 11 reflects better engagement in learning and the desire to succeed. The school's good practice in improving attendance is being shared across the local authority.

Governors continue to monitor the impact of actions taken to improve the school through strategy group meetings. They hold both senior and faculty leaders to account for achievement and teaching and learning.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Strong leadership and management by the Principal and senior leaders has brought staff and students together as a team with high aspirations to succeed.
- Approaches to teaching and learning which engage students and lead to accelerated progress are more common.
- Work on attendance and the improvements in attendance.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Systems for assessing students' attainment and progress are inaccurate. Consequently, data at Key Stage 3 is unreliable.
- Whilst policies and practice to improve the school are clear, not all staff apply the policies consistently.

External support

The local authority continues to provide effective and regular support. Colleagues from the NSS are helping faculty leaders to develop their roles and contributing to improvements in teaching and learning, through support for individual teachers, and opportunities to observe good practice in the support school.