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Mrs Lois Baird
Headteacher
Solway Community Technology College
Liddell Street
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Cumbria
CA7 4DD

Dear Mrs Baird

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Solway Community Technology College, Cumbria

Following my visit to your school on 29 January 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. 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 November 2014. 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:

- add milestone measures to the school development plan and identify who will check that actions are moving forward and how the impact on students' outcomes will be assessed
- make sure that the targets set for students help them to build on their knowledge and skills systematically and rapidly
- further develop the scrutiny of students' work to include an evaluation of students' progress over time, taking account of starting points and age related expectations.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, the business manager, faculty leaders and two governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I had a telephone conversation with the school's local authority adviser. The school improvement plans were evaluated and I looked at various other documents detailing actions and progress to date. I met with a group of students and visited classes during lessons, where I spoke to more students and looked at their books.

Context

Since the last inspection, three new 'head of faculty' appointments have been made from within school. The functional skills course has been removed from the curriculum.

Main findings

You have taken swift action to tackle the areas identified as requiring improvement at the last inspection. Staff and governors are working together effectively to drive improvements forward; all are fully committed to make sure students achieve as well as they can. You have adapted your school development planning appropriately, setting actions within a realistic time-scale. The people responsible for carrying out the actions are identified but it is not clear who will check that plans are on track or how the impact of actions will be evaluated. It would be helpful to add milestone measures so that governors and leaders can be sure the changes are having the intended impact on improving teaching and quickening students' progress.

Lesson plans in all subjects show that teachers are planning activities to provide greater challenge for the most able students and give support to the least able so that all can succeed. Marking has improved since the start of the year when the new policy was introduced. The best 'practice examples' you have put together provide a useful steer to develop marking further. During my visits to classrooms, students were attentive and keen to talk about their work. Those who spoke with me had a good understanding of what they were learning and were enthusiastic. They say they particularly enjoy food technology, history and physical education.

You have appropriately prioritised raising achievement in science, history and English. Raising achievement in science remains the biggest challenge. The science subject leader is introducing several changes, including the introduction of a new scheme at Key Stage 3, the provision of alternative examination routes and interventions to support students in Year 11 who have gaps in their learning. The impact of these initiatives will need to be checked carefully to make sure they improve teaching and help students to make the progress of which they are capable. In history and English, teachers are taking appropriate action to improve the range and quality of teaching and check students' progress.

The previous inspection recommended that progress targets for all students should represent high expectations of what they can achieve. While maintaining high aspirations for students, it is important that teaching builds on students' prior knowledge and skills systematically. There are still occasions when students are set targets that do not reflect their learning needs.

The recommendations to strengthen the effectiveness of leadership focused on improving procedures to monitor teaching and check its impact on students' learning. You are providing appropriate additional support or challenge to teachers where necessary. Professional development is being planned well, to support teachers in implementing new initiatives and to enable them to share good practice. Governors have strengthened their monitoring role through links with subject leaders. The new form on which they note details of their visits provides a useful record and prompts governors to ask challenging questions.

The creation of the 'head of faculty' role has strengthened the sharing of expertise between subjects and provides an additional layer of monitoring to make sure students achieve well in all subjects. Leaders at all levels are tracking students' progress more rigorously so that any students who are not making enough progress can be given extra support early on. The recently introduced forms to record lesson observations and findings from work scrutiny provide useful guidelines to check that policies and new initiatives are being implemented consistently. Leaders are ensuring that marking is improving and that teaching is more varied to take account of the range of ability within each class; however, the evaluation of students' learning and progress is not yet checked with the same rigour in each subject.

A lot has been done in a relatively short period of time since the last inspection. It is too soon to assess the impact of new initiatives at this stage, but revised policies and procedures provide a firm foundation on which to build. There is some strong teaching in the school, reflected in the school's high value added scores overall for low- and middle-ability students in 2014. It is also clear that all staff are committed to bringing about rapid improvement and get the school to be good as quickly as possible.

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 school is drawing on external support well. Links with local high schools and another small school further afield are supporting staff in developing their skills and sharing best practice. You are using the expertise of specialist teachers and National Leaders of Education effectively. Support from the local authority has been limited to date as the school was not previously identified as requiring support. Regular

strategic improvement meetings have now been established to check the school's progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Jean Olsson-Law

Her Majesty's Inspector