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19 March 2015

Mrs Helen Johnson
Headteacher
West Cumbria Learning Centre
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Distington
Workington
Cumbria
CA14 4PJ

Dear Mrs Johnson

Special measures monitoring inspection of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Following my visit to your centre on 18 March 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. 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 centre's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the centre became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:
The centre is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.
The centre may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Management Committee and the Acting Corporate Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

Sonja Øyen

Additional Inspector

Annex

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

- Build leadership capacity and develop a clear succession plan so that leadership is distributed across the centre and is not over-reliant on the headteacher or external support by:
 - taking swift action to ensure an effective leadership team is in place which is rigorously held to account by the management committee
 - developing middle leaders by ensuring all teachers and support staff have a progression plan for their professional development and that its impact is rigorously checked.
- Ensure leaders and managers fully evaluate the impact of their actions to improve the centre by effectively checking key areas such as:
 - the attendance of all groups
 - the longer term success of those students who reintegrate back into mainstream school and those students who leave the centre at the end of Key Stage 4
 - the number and type of incidents relating to the behaviour of students while at the centre
 - the small, but significant, steps in progress made by students who attend the centre for either short periods of time or on a part-time basis.
- Improve the quality of teaching in Key Stages 3 and 4 in order to accelerate students' progress and lift attainment by:
 - ensuring planned changes to the curriculum are implemented fully and support students to gain appropriate qualifications
 - giving staff the opportunity to see outstanding practice in other schools and monitoring the impact on students' progress of actions taken as a result
 - ensuring that good practice already seen in some areas of the centre is shared effectively across the centre: for example, in teachers' marking, teachers' planning, the use of small-steps assessment to identify students' progress and the use of classroom displays to support learning.
- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of management may be improved. The external review of governance should also include a specific focus on the impact of student premium spending.

Ofsted will make recommendations for action on governance to the authority responsible for the centre.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 18 March 2015

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and the work of three students, met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, a Key Stage 3 student, other members of teaching and non-teaching staff, the Chair of the Management Committee and a representative from the local authority. The inspector and the headteacher undertook joint observations of three sessions for students in Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. On the day of inspection, eight students were absent following exclusion the day before for defying the centre's rules and a small number were out of the centre engaged in work in the community.

Context

Since January the number on roll has risen to 62, the highest ever, with just over half of students being dual registered. Twenty students are being supported through the hospital and home tutoring service. Currently, the centre has available places only for Key Stage 4 students. Since the monitoring inspection in December 2014 there have been several changes in staffing: a specialist mathematics teacher has taken up post; one teacher is in the early stages of a phased return; and since mid-February, a teacher has held responsibility for students' progress in English, mathematics, humanities and personal, social and health education, and a higher level teaching assistant has been appointed to support students at time of crisis/time-out. The centre is looking to appoint a specialist English teacher.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The centre now has colour-coded tracking sheets giving a summative and comparative overview of each student's behavioural/pastoral and academic progress and attainment in all subjects. The centre is taking a proactive stance in raising concern at local meetings regarding the failure of some mainstream schools to provide timely baseline information. The data present a varied picture of students' achievement with very few students making consistently expected or better than expected progress. Students are most usually working at lower levels than expected for their age but over time, the data indicate some catch-up most especially when progress in being 'ready to learn' is stable. In lessons, students were willing to listen and participate. Their work was generally neat and tidy. Students had responded to teachers' comments in 'the pink box' and added to or amended their work. In lessons, Key Stage 2 pupils tried hard with their cursive handwriting and Key Stage 3 students, after several attempts, solved a problem drawing on their awareness of consecutive numbers. For older students the high use of worksheets gives little evidence of individual work or of their progress in skills and understanding.

The quality of teaching

Staff have responded positively to points for improvement in the quality of teaching raised in previous monitoring inspections and in observations made by the headteacher and others. Teaching assistants, for example, are holding back in their prompting of answers in lessons while still encouraging and praising students' good behaviour and attitude. There is scope for them to be more participative in class discussions and in highlighting key learning points. In lessons, the adults were consistently positive in their dealing with students which kept students engaged and willing to learn. They enjoyed practical tasks; Key Stage 4 students joked about not being able to see clearly when asked to read when wearing glasses. The informality led to shared knowledge about the workings of the eye. Teachers know individual students really well. They are skilled in coping with often sudden changes in behaviour and in reinforcing their expectations of students' readiness to learn. What is less evident is the reinforcement and acceleration of learning by explicitly linking what students do and say to key teaching and learning points and to students' personal targets. On occasion, opportunities are missed to allow a student to teach others, to explain their thinking and to exploit the potential of the interactive whiteboard as a learning tool.

The centre accepts that feedback to students on how well they are doing is still inconsistent. Oral feedback in lessons led to students having a go and sticking at a task. The quality of written feedback in how to improve varied, especially for the older students.

Links with other professionals have led to offers of training and to a heightened awareness of effective practice elsewhere. The proposal to hold guided reading sessions alongside the daily use of a computerised reading programme is a promising step in accelerating progress in reading.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

As noted in the previous monitoring inspection, the atmosphere in the centre is calm, orderly and positive. New students have shown some challenging behaviour and an escalating disregard for the rules which has resulted in fixed-term exclusions. Senior staff are rightly looking at how best to manage the return of these students and how to speed up the process of reintegration to mainstream schools for those showing an improvement in attitude. The hard line taken by staff is accepted by other students; indeed, some have suggested rules and consequences specifically for the use of the room allocated for time-out sessions. Student councillors are regularly contributing ideas about the workings of the centre.

Accumulating recorded and anecdotal evidence shows the positive impact of the work of the counsellor and newly appointed teaching assistant who works with

students at times of crisis. Students are beginning to ask to leave the classroom when they feel angry or frustrated and the length of time out is reducing. Targeted intervention and support following the spotting of concerns from the log of incidents have led to a marked reduction in recorded incidents for some students. In the autumn term of 2014, the number of incidents requiring restraint by physical handling was half that of the same term in 2013. Staff plan to introduce revised and new questionnaires to collect students' views about their own personal progress.

Students now have a weekly session in personal, social and health education with individualised specialist input for Year 11 students. The use of local agencies ensures that content is up to date particularly concerning national issues, such as grooming. Recently compiled records of students' attendance at sessions have identified gaps in provision for individuals and led to the introduction of a rolling programme. Staff are aware of the pressing need to liaise with mainstream schools to track provision for the dual registered students.

Attendance is rising. At 78%, it is close to the centre's target of 80%. The figures for persistent absence in the autumn term 2014 were lower than for pupil referral units nationally (2013 data) and 11 students received certificates for 100% attendance. The centre is working with the local authority to ensure the best placement for students with records of highly disrupted attendance.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders have sustained the momentum of change and followed the action plan arising from the last monitoring inspection. They are right in their view that time is needed to secure gains and to refine practices to ensure the centre has the information it needs to continue to improve outcomes for students. With staff returning to work, new appointments to be made, and staff new to management responsibilities, the centre is not able to support newly qualified teachers and capacity to improve remains limited. That said, staff are working well as a team. The headteacher gives a firm, clear steer. Staff value her support and encouragement. The deputy headteacher's lead in students' personal development has been a key factor in the growing willingness of mainstream schools to refer students and to call on counselling at the centre for students at risk of being excluded. The newly promoted middle manager has been quick to devise systems to plug the gap in personal education. Proficiency in evaluating the quality and impact of provision is growing. There is a need now to shift the focus in observing teaching sessions even more to evaluating how well students are learning, and to ensure all staff and the management committee evaluate critically the data concerning students' progress, in order to pinpoint exactly where and why gains have been made or not. Minutes of meetings of the management committee show members are questioning the outcomes for students and the impact of the use of additional funding.

External support

The review by the local authority of the centre's progress has now been scheduled for early in the summer term. The updated notes from the adviser assigned to the centre provide useful pointers as to areas for particular scrutiny.