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7 May 2015

Mr Domenic Volpe
Head of School
William Howard School
Longtown Road
Brampton
Cumbria
CA8 1AR

Dear Mr Volpe,

No formal designation monitoring inspection of William Howard School

Following my visit with Allan Torr, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 6 May 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged students. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management (including governance) at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the executive headteacher, head of school, members of the senior leadership team, several teachers holding positions of responsibility and two governors. Inspectors also met with groups of students in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Inspectors reviewed students' exercise books and visited a number of lessons across the school in which they focused their attention on the learning of disadvantaged students. Inspectors scrutinised the school's safeguarding procedures, including the checks made on employees when they are recruited to the school and on other adults who visit the school. The school's documentation relating to the achievement of the disadvantaged students was studied; this included the school's self-evaluation document and development plans, along with the school's tracking of students' achievement over time. Data relating to the attendance of disadvantaged students were closely considered.

Context

William Howard School is a larger-than-average mixed secondary school with a sixth form. Over 1400 students are currently on roll. Around 13% of students currently enrolled at the school are eligible for support through the pupil premium (additional government funding for those who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority). This is significantly lower than the national average. The school converted to become academy in 2012. The head of school was seconded to his post in February 2014, from his substantive post as the deputy headteacher of the school. The previous, long-standing headteacher now has the role of executive headteacher overseeing the work of the William Howard Trust. In September 2015 the school will become part of the William Howard Trust - a multi-academy trust. The Trust will be working with two other schools: Workington Academy and Yewdale Primary School.

Disadvantaged students at William Howard School

The head of school and senior leadership team recognised that systems for tracking and supporting the school's disadvantaged students were not effective in raising attainment and achievement. The head of school has swiftly instilled high expectations and a strong focus by staff on those students who are disadvantaged. A senior leader has been appointed to care for and coordinate the progress of disadvantaged students and to lead a whole-school pupil premium strategy group. Systems to track and monitor students' achievement have been improved to enable leaders at all levels to build a better understanding of individual students' needs. Leaders have ensured that disadvantaged students are now a principal focus among staff and a renewed approach to introducing precise support to suit the needs of students is under way. Learning mentors have been appointed to help meet the needs of disadvantaged students and are having a positive impact.

The prior attainment of disadvantaged students varies in each year group. School leaders recognise this variation and make adaptations to the school's curriculum accordingly. The most able disadvantaged students do well in GCSE examinations and progress to the school sixth form, where they make good progress. There have been notable university successes, with many high-achieving disadvantaged students progressing to universities of their choice.

The majority of the school's disadvantaged students are within the middle ability range and, in the school's recent past, these students have attained less well than their peers. GCSE results for the disadvantaged cohort of twenty two students were disappointing in 2013/14; a significant gap remained between disadvantaged students and other students. New systems and methods of support used by the school are starting to have impact. The careful analysis of current students' achievement data has enabled the school to identify key departments that require further leadership support to assess the right strategies to raise outcomes for the disadvantaged. Student underperformance is supported with a raising achievement

plan (RAP). Current reliable school data indicate a narrowing of the gap at Key Stage 4 in 2014/15, with a further narrowing anticipated in 2015/16. The progress of disadvantaged students at Key Stage 3 is not tracked as rigorously by leaders, but support is provided for these students.

The pastoral and academic communication links between directors of learning and senior leaders ensure that a comprehensive summary of improvements and plan for next steps are renewed regularly and reflected upon. Information about students is provided to teaching staff frequently, resulting in a more widely understood approach to the individual needs of students. Pastoral support for disadvantaged students is good. The school works well with agencies to remove barriers to learning and to promote aspirations and clear career pathways. Transition for students is well thought out, with appropriately planned careers education and guidance programmes delivered through personal development time. At Key Stage 4, disadvantaged students are provided with careers interviews and leaders go to great lengths to ensure that work placements and college visits are undertaken to reinforce progression beyond school. The school works hard to ensure that all disadvantaged students are in employment, education or training.

Curriculum changes are also helping to accelerate the progress of disadvantaged students. Leaders consider the local labour market in adapting the curriculum, as well as making adaptations depending on the needs of students within each cohort. The school's options programme involves discussions with parents and learning mentors to ensure that all students have a good breadth and balance suited to their personal career aspirations. This has reduced the number of disadvantaged students not going into education, training or employment.

The school recognises that below-average attendance is restricting success for some disadvantaged students. The family support worker has had a beneficial effect on building relationships with parents and linking further external agency support. The most significant impact of this approach has been for looked-after children whose attendance is now well above the national average. While attendance is now monitored at all levels within the school community, disadvantaged students' attendance is still below that of their peers. The school holds formal discussions with parents when there are concerns about their children's attendance. Inspectors considered that the trigger for attendance concern at 85% was not aspirational and should be reviewed. This would raise expectation and support achievement for disadvantaged students.

Governors are supportive and ask challenging questions regarding the priority for improving provision for the disadvantaged students. A governor is responsible for the provision for disadvantaged students and understands the school's action plan for improvement. However, the lack of precision within improvement plans has resulted in governors being less effective in challenging leaders on the impact of actions intended to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students. The school's arrangements for the safeguarding of students are excellent and governors have received appropriate training to discharge their statutory duties in this respect.

External support

School leaders and governors welcome external evaluation. The leadership team has completed an audit of effective use of funding and is clear about the key areas of focus to develop action-planning. The Trust and senior team have already invited further critical evaluation to take place this academic year, using additional inspectors and local authority advisors to review further the provision for disadvantaged students. The executive headteacher provides strong support through the Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL). The school has well-established links with external organisations to support the well-being of disadvantaged students.

The strengths in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged students effectively to achieve their potential are:

- strong pastoral support for those children who are looked after by the local authority is supporting their learning and increasing their attendance significantly
- good safeguarding arrangements are in place for all students, increasing for those who are disadvantaged. These contribute to an improving picture of achievement and attainment within a safe, secure environment
- committed leadership by the headteacher and senior team is now improving the achievement of disadvantaged students, because there is a strong focus on this group throughout the school
- robust, well-supported transition for students moving from Key Stage 4 to Key Stage 5 includes strong information, advice and guidance for students, so that they are prepared effectively for the next stage in their education
- timely and well-focused coordination of the work by subject leaders, directors of learning, learning mentors and senior leaders results in disadvantaged students gaining appropriate support to make progress
- the reflective pursuit of best practice by the Trust and senior leaders means that they are open to new ideas as how to improve outcomes for the school's disadvantaged students.

The weaknesses in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged students effectively to achieve their potential are:

- feedback provided through teachers' marking sometimes pays insufficient attention to improving the understanding of students. The impact of marking does not lead to consistently improved work

- school plans do not always have sharp, measurable success criteria; consequently, governors and leaders cannot always measure easily the impact of their actions to raise the achievement of disadvantaged students.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve governance by ensuring that governors challenge the impact of support and funding for the disadvantaged students with more precision.
- Improve the attendance of disadvantaged students.
- Continue to embed whole-school strategies for improving achievement and attainment for disadvantaged students.
- Improve the quality of target-setting and tracking of students' progress at Key Stage 3.
- Ensure that disadvantaged students know what they need to do to improve their work.

I am copying this letter to the Corporate Director of Children's Services for Cumbria, the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the William Howard Trust Board. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Dawn Platt

Her Majesty's Inspector