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Dr Rob Petrie
Headteacher
Cockermouth School
Castlegate Drive
Cockermouth
Cumbria
CA13 9HF

Dear Dr Petrie

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Cockermouth School

Following my visit to your school on 19 May 2015, with John Gornall Her Majesty's Inspector 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 pupils. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management, including governance, at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the headteacher, groups of students in both Key Stages 3 and 4, staff in the school and the governor responsible for reporting to the governing body on the achievement of disadvantaged students. Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and documents relating to the achievement of disadvantaged students. Inspectors examined minutes of meetings of the governing body, attendance records, the school's self-evaluation of its work and the school development plan. Inspectors also looked at a sample of disadvantaged students' work in English and mathematics.

Context

Since the previous inspection, in May 2012, there have been several changes to the school, particularly at the level of senior leadership. The former headteacher left the school at the end of December 2014. The current headteacher has been acting headteacher since January 2015 and assumed his current position in February 2015. Several new governors have been appointed, including the Chair of the Governing

Body. The headteacher has revised the roles and responsibilities of the senior leadership team and made a number of new appointments. The school is in the process of converting to academy status and will open as a new academy in autumn 2015.

The school is larger than average and provides education for students from 11 to 18. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is much lower than average, as is the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language. There is a lower than average proportion of students with special educational needs or disabilities. The overwhelming majority of students are from a White British background. The proportion of disadvantaged students, that is those eligible for support through the pupil premium, is lower than average but increasing. The pupil premium is additional government funding to support students eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority. The school meets the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectation for students' attainment and progress. The school experiences little difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff.

The achievement of disadvantaged students

School leaders and staff are well aware that the achievement of disadvantaged students has not been good enough. In 2014, the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers in the school and nationally was much wider than average. This is because actions taken to support such students had been ineffective and the expenditure of the pupil premium had had little discernible impact.

With the appointment of the new headteacher, there has been a sea change in the direction of the school. He has communicated categorically to all members of the school community that urgent action must be taken to ensure disadvantaged students achieve their potential; this is seen as a key element in senior leaders' drive to become an outstanding school.

Governors have followed the lead of the headteacher and are now passionate that this legacy of poor performance be overturned. In designating a governor with responsibility for monitoring the achievement of disadvantaged students, the governing body has shown its commitment to giving this area of the school's work a much higher priority than it has had in the past. They are determined to make sure that funds available through the pupil premium are spent only in ways that have a direct and demonstrable impact on improving the achievement, and hence life chances, of all disadvantaged students.

The headteacher has swiftly set in motion appropriate actions to turn round this pattern of underachievement and there are already some early signs of positive impact. For example, the attendance of disadvantaged students has increased and their rate of persistent absenteeism has halved since this time last year. This marked improvement is tangible evidence of the school's success in reaching out more effectively to parents of disadvantaged students and the students themselves. As a result, those who previously had poor attendance records now attend school on a more regular basis.

Investment in a more refined system of tracking achievement has enabled staff to monitor more effectively the progress of all students, including those who are disadvantaged. Teachers now use this information to step in when students fall behind and offer additional help to get them back on track. School leaders have plans to refine this process further, by providing packages of support that are tailored in a more bespoke manner to the specific needs of individual students.

According to the school's records, scrutinised during the inspection, the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers is narrowing across both Key Stages 3 and 4. School leaders openly shared with inspectors their disappointment that current actions have come too late for some students in Year 11. As a result, some disadvantaged students continue to underachieve in this year group. However, the picture is more promising for the most able disadvantaged students, including those in the sixth form, who are predicted to do well in their forthcoming public examinations.

School leaders are quick to admit that some initiatives they have put in place remain embryonic. These well-intentioned and highly appropriate plans are still not always having the desired impact at classroom level. For example, although links between pastoral and academic staff have been strengthened and teachers receive comprehensive information on the progress and behaviour of disadvantaged students, there is little demonstrable evidence that such information is as yet being used effectively. As a result, when inspectors examined the books of some disadvantaged students, it was clear that the work was not always well matched to individual students' needs, leading, in at least one instance, to disengagement.

School leaders recognise that a lower proportion of disadvantaged students than is seen nationally choose to progress to the school's sixth form. As a result, the curriculum for September 2015 has been enriched in both Key Stages 4 and 5 by including a wider range of vocational subjects. In this way, it is hoped that all students, including disadvantaged students, may follow a path that better suits their needs, abilities and interests.

Pastoral support for disadvantaged students is improving as a result of the actions senior leaders have taken, for example, in providing an 'assertive mentoring' programme and more effective outreach to students at risk of disaffection. These initiatives have contributed well to improved attendance. The school works well with a range of external agencies and groups of disadvantaged students to raise awareness about the dangers they might face outside school, such as substance abuse or child sexual exploitation. Funds available through the pupil premium have been used on occasion to enrich disadvantaged students' lives, by, for example, facilitating theatre trips and residential visits.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding students meet statutory requirements. All staff receive appropriate training to help to keep students safe.

External support

The school receives 'light touch' support from the local authority. The school has forged productive links with a local secondary school that has been successful in

improving the achievement of disadvantaged students. Senior leaders are working closely with their feeder primary schools to ensure a smoother transition for disadvantaged students into secondary school.

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

- strong leadership from the headteacher which has inspired all members of the school community to redouble their efforts so that all disadvantaged students achieve their potential
- improved procedures to track and monitor the progress of individual disadvantaged students and more timely and effective intervention when students fall behind in their work. As a result, gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and their peers are starting to narrow
- effective engagement with parents of disadvantaged students and the students themselves, leading to a marked improvement in attendance.

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

- pupil premium funding has not been spent wisely in the past and had little discernible impact. As a result, improvements have come too late for some students
- improved procedures, such as better communication between pastoral and academic staff, are not yet embedded and as a result do not always have sufficient impact at classroom level.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure all existing initiatives and plans for further improvement become embedded and translate into the routine practice of all teachers, so that all disadvantaged students are consistently challenged to achieve as well as they might.
- Ensure the expenditure of the funds available through the pupil premium has a direct and demonstrable impact on improving the achievement of disadvantaged students.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant
Her Majesty's Inspector