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5 June 2015

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

Dear Mrs Johnson

Special measures monitoring inspection of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Following my visit to your centre on 4 June 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 fifth 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 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 behavior 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 are 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 fifth monitoring inspection on 4 June 2015

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, two members of the teaching staff, the Business Development Officer, the Student Welfare Officer, a Key Stage 4 student, the Chair of the Management Committee, the Chair of the Achievement and Quality of Teaching Sub-Committee and a representative from the local authority. The inspector also held a telephone discussion with the headteacher of a local secondary school regarding the re-integration of students. The inspector and headteacher jointly observed three sessions for students in Key Stages 2 and 3.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection in March, 10 students have either been re-integrated into mainstream schools or have been found specialist provision. The number of students on roll has risen to 64. At 30, the number of students registered at both the centre and at a mainstream school is also at its highest. There has been some reorganisation of accommodation to establish 'a pastoral wing' and an existing member of staff has been appointed to the new post of Student Welfare Officer. Two temporary teachers and two temporary support staff are working with students in the centre and in hospital and home tuition. Leaders have recently appointed two teachers to take up post in September.

Achievement of pupils at the school

As noted in previous monitoring inspections, students make often marked personal progress particularly in their willingness to learn. The centre now has data from tracking students' progress to show that academic achievement is strengthening. That from the second half of the spring term shows a more positive picture of academic achievement than before. A Year 10 student commented, 'I'm learning here', 'I'm doing well'. A growing number of students show good progress in all subjects because of their heightened interest in learning, and the programmes of tailored support and intervention sessions provided by the centre. Gaps in students' knowledge and skills are narrowing. Weekly test results, for example, show students' increasing facility with multiplication facts. Work in books and in lessons show that students confidently follow calculation procedures but are less adept at explaining their thinking or the mathematical concepts involved. Although word-processed stories on display showed good development of ideas and the use of some interesting phrases, the impact of the recent focus on handwriting, spelling and grammar has yet to show in the accuracy, legibility and overall quality of students' hand-written work.

The quality of teaching

Evidence from this monitoring inspection confirms the findings of observations by leaders, the local authority and a member of the management committee that students are moving on in their learning because of increasing consistency in the quality of teaching. Staff continue to act on points for development raised in monitoring inspections and observations show teachers placing a stronger emphasis on the checking of understanding. For example, Key Stage 2 pupils were given the role of 'teacher' using the interactive whiteboard to show how to subtract three-digit numbers. The teacher then rightly homed in on the misalignment of figures and misunderstanding of number values which had resulted in incorrect calculations.

Sessions were well planned with differing activities for groups and individuals. The effective use of video clips and links to real-life contexts caught the students' interest and, because staff skilfully managed students' interruptions and volatile behaviour, all students took part in the tasks set. Some opportunities were missed to highlight how well the identified success criteria were being met, and to review and to reinforce key learning points. Inconsistency persists in the way staff use 'pink box' marking, in oral feedback about how well students are learning, and in the quality of displays in rooms and the centre as a whole. Staff are discussing these issues and accept the need to celebrate students' work more widely. A good start has been made in the English room to show 'what a good one looks like' in writing.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

A Year 10 student commented that discussions with staff at the centre had helped him to realise the need 'to knuckle down and get my GCSEs'. He knew that his now regular attendance was in stark contrast to his poor record at mainstream school, and although he found the behaviour of some students distracting, he 'got the work done'. A headteacher of a secondary school spoke positively about the changes for the good in the attitude, behaviour and achievement of a student who returned to school having spent time at the centre. These two cameos illustrate the strengthening effectiveness of the centre in fostering changes in attitudes towards learning and in social behaviour overall. The centre has a number of recent success stories due to staff's persistence in seeking help for students and their families from other agencies, and in tailoring programmes and learning situations to meet individual needs. The 12-week programme of support is proving effective in getting students ready to go back into mainstream education. This is in large part due to the increasingly effective systems to assess initial key needs, to support pastorally and academically, and to track and evaluate students' progress weekly. The attention to students' welfare and safety is meticulous.

Attendance has again risen to just below the target of 80% with improved rates of attendance for all groups when compared with the figures for 2013/14. For example,

the attendance of those permanently excluded is up by 17 percentage points but the centre accepts that there is still some way to go to match national rates. The successful efforts of the Student Welfare Officer, in her first week in post, to locate students who had not attended, indicate higher targets for attendance are attainable.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The effectiveness of leadership and management is strengthening. Staff commented on the strong team spirit and the wish to work together for the good of the centre. They showed pride in what has been achieved and attributed much to the headteacher's firm lead as well as her encouragement to 'think outside the box' and to share ideas. The focus in professional development provided to reduce inconsistencies in how policies are implemented and to improve the quality and range of provision is exactly what is needed, with recent input provided on the role of the teaching assistant, behaviour management and homophobic bullying. Staff and students have also taken part in one-off events including workshops on robotics and African drumming.

Staff with identified responsibilities are playing their part in keeping the improvement ball rolling. However, some are still relatively new to their role and have yet to show, although there are encouraging early signs, that their actions are fully embedded and are having a sustained, positive impact on students' achievement. The centre will have a full complement of teaching and support staff in September following the appointment of experienced staff who bring expertise in science and outdoor learning and personal, social and health education. Recent advertisements for support staff led to 21 applications: a good pointer to the centre's improving profile in the area. Plans are already in hand to support new staff and to enable them, where possible, to gain additional qualifications. It is vital that leaders work with these staff to secure consistency of practice, such as in marking, and to avoid a hiatus or dip in students' personal and academic achievement. Given this, the centre is not in a position to appoint newly qualified teachers.

Members of the management committee are drawing on professional expertise to gather their own evidence of the school's effectiveness. The detailed report compiled by the Chair of the Achievement and Quality of Teaching Sub-Committee after a day in the centre identifies strengths and helpful points for consideration related to the areas of key judgements in Ofsted inspections.

External support

The local authority continues to support the headteacher and management committee as needed but is rightly looking to them to initiate, monitor and evaluate the programme of improvement. This approach by the local authority generally works well although hiccups in links with services within the authority are hindering

the centre's moves to manage staggered re-integration. The report from the local authority's review in late April of the centre's progress identified many positive aspects in relation to the areas for improvement identified in the inspection in December 2013. The five recommendations underline points raised in monitoring inspections and the centre's own evaluations.