

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22

West Lancs Investment Centre T 0300 123 1231

Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566857

Direct F 01695 729320

Direct email: jkinsman@cfbt.com



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Mrs Colette Macklin
Principal
Waterhead Academy
Huddersfield Road
Oldham
OL4 3NY

Dear Mrs Macklin

Special measures monitoring inspection of Waterhead Academy

Following my visit to the academy on 3 and 4 June 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

This visit was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures in November 2014. 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Subject to our discussions, I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint one newly qualified teacher to the science department. This appointment is subject to two conditions: first, that the new member of staff receives high quality mentoring and, second, will be given opportunities to see and learn from good to outstanding practice.

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 Governing Body and the Executive Director Health and Wellbeing for Oldham.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2014

- Increase the impact of leadership and management by:
 - making sure that teachers' marking is effective and their assessments are accurate and that both are used effectively to plan lessons and to increase students' rate of progress
 - making sure all leaders and governors have accurate data from which they can make decisions that lead to improvements in students' achievement
 - improving the impact middle leaders have on the quality of teaching and on making sure classrooms are orderly.

- Improve students' behaviour, safety and attitudes by:
 - making sure all adults apply the academy's behaviour rules and codes consistently
 - eliminating disruption to learning in lessons
 - combating all types of swearing and homophobic derogatory language
 - further increasing attendance, particularly for disadvantaged students and those who have special educational needs.

- Improve the impact of teaching on students' progress by:
 - developing students' communication skills and their ability to explain clearly their reasoning, thinking and ideas
 - making sure all students are engaged and interested in their work
 - increasing the level of challenge in lessons, particularly for the most-able students.

- Quicken students' progress, with a particular focus on:
 - students who are disadvantaged, so that the attainment gap between them and their peers closes rapidly
 - students who are known to have special educational needs, so that more achieve their potential
 - the most-able students, so that far more attain A* and A grades at GCSE.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 3 to 4 June 2015

Evidence

During my visit I held meetings with you and other members of the senior team, including those of your colleagues with responsibility for students' behaviour and safety, achievement and the quality of teaching. I met separately with the Chair of the Governing Body, a group of Year 10 students, a group of teachers with responsibility for the English Baccalaureate subjects and a group of classroom teachers. I held telephone conversations with a representative of the academy's sponsors and the Chair of the Governing Body's Raising Achievement Board. I observed a number of lessons jointly with a member of the senior leadership team and examined the work in a sample of students' books. I scrutinised the academy's single central record of the checks made on the suitability of adults to work with young people, the academy development plan, the reports of the visits made by the academy improvement partner and the pupil premium learning review. The pupil premium is additional government funding the academy receives to support those students eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority. I considered senior leaders' plans for the new curriculum, which is planned for implementation from September 2015.

Context

Since my previous monitoring inspection, a member of the senior leadership team has left the academy. The arrangements for the leadership and management of the curriculum have been revised. As a consequence, 23 subject departments have been reorganised into 10 faculties. Three teachers joined the staff at the start of the summer term, two are working in the science department and the third is a specialist teacher of mathematics who has taken responsibility for the subject at Key Stage 3.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The academy's current data for Key Stage 4 suggest improvements in a number of attainment measures at GCSE, when compared to last year. For example, the proportion of students attaining five higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, has increased by 12 percentage points. Should these results be realised in the final Year 11 examinations, the academy will exceed the government's minimum expectation on this measure, having been below it in 2014. Further, the academy reports that the proportion of students making the progress expected of them in GCSE English and mathematics this year has also improved by 17 percentage points and 16 percentage points respectively. The academy's data also indicate similarly encouraging improvements in the performance of some key groups, for example the attainment and progress of both the boys and girls. However, the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers has widened, when compared to 2014. Further, although the progress data for English and mathematics are promising, these measures remain below 2014 national averages.

When the latest Year 11 data are analysed in terms of students' capability, low and middle ability groups are shown to be making at least expected progress in the majority of their subjects. The reverse is the case for the most able.

For pragmatic reasons senior leaders have directed staff energies into monitoring closely the attainment and progress of students in Year 10 and Year 11. The data on all students' performance are collected every half term and analysed to determine students' progress against their subject targets. This enables senior leaders and heads of faculty to identify quickly those students who are underperforming and put in place extra help to get them back on track. The data suggest that in Year 11 this strategy is particularly successful with students of lower and middle ability.

Systems for target-setting and monitoring progress at Key Stage 3 are under review in the light of the changes to the way students are assessed against the new National Curriculum. As a consequence, the monitoring of students' progress at Key Stage 3 is not as robust as it is for students at Key Stage 4. Senior leaders are aware of this and plans are in hand to introduce greater rigour to this aspect of the academy's work at the start of the autumn term.

The quality of teaching

Observations of classroom practice reveal that teaching is most effective when teachers think carefully about how they will approach the teaching of a particular topic. Teachers make sure that activities are structured and sequenced appropriately, so that students are able to grasp the key ideas and engage with the learning. However, not all teaching is yet of this quality. In some lessons the work is not well matched to students' needs, particularly the most able and, as a result, the progress of this group slows. In other lessons, teachers stick rigidly to their plan and do not move students on quickly enough. Consequently, the pace of teaching is not well matched to the pace of students' learning and, as a result, students' progress is not as rapid as it could be.

The recently introduced communications strategy is helping teachers develop their questioning techniques and, where it is used well, students formulate their answers. As a consequence, this makes demands on students' thinking, helps develop their understanding and contributes to improving their oracy. However, inconsistencies in teachers' use of this strategy remain, with some teachers saying that they find it difficult to use in their subject areas.

Senior leaders' drive to improve the quality of marking is beginning to bear fruit. In the sample of students' books scrutinised the best marking is regular and incisive. In such marking, students are informed by their teachers about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve their work; this students then act on. When marking and feedback are of this quality it has a tangible impact on students' progress. High quality marking such as this is seen in English. However,

inconsistencies remain; in some books teachers do not get to the heart of how a student can improve their work and, as a result, opportunities are missed for marking to have a positive impact on students' progress.

The scrutiny of the work in students' mathematics books shows that students are following a course of study at the correct level for their age and capability. However, the teaching approach adopted by the mathematics department focuses on developing mathematical techniques which students then practise by answering set questions. There are too few opportunities for students to apply these techniques in novel situations or by carrying out investigations. As a result, opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of mathematics are not being maximised. Nevertheless, senior leaders and the faculty leader for mathematics are aware of these issues and have plans in place to address them.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

My observations of students in classrooms, their movement between lessons and interactions at break and lunchtimes would suggest that relationships between members of the school community are characterised by mutual respect. Students take pride in their appearance and this is reflected in their high standards of school uniform. The academy site is generally tidy and students treat it with respect. This is evident in buildings that are in good repair and graffiti free.

When asked students say they feel safe at the academy. They are knowledgeable about the different forms that bullying can take and say that when students display this kind of behaviour towards each other they are confident that it will be dealt with effectively, by the staff.

Inspectors' concerns about homophobic behaviour, witnessed at the previous inspection, are being roundly addressed. Those students who expressed an opinion, said that the use of the expression 'gay' as a derogatory term is now less prevalent than was the case in the past and, in any event, if a member of staff hears a student use this word inappropriately it is dealt with. The academy's commitment to inclusion has been recognised by the award of 'Stonewall Champion School' status. This award recognises that the academy promotes an inclusive and safe environment and empowers students and staff alike to celebrate difference and challenge prejudice.

Rates of attendance and persistent absence remain stubbornly below 2014 national averages, as was the case at the previous inspection. The data for disadvantaged students are of particular concern and this group's weak attendance is having a negative impact on their outcomes. Although senior leaders have already started to take action to improve attendance and have appointed a specialist member of staff to help address this key development priority, the latter is not due to join the staff until September. Senior leaders and governors are acutely aware that they need to

accelerate the pace of developments in this area if they are to minimise the negative impact that poor attendance is having on disadvantaged students' life chances.

Senior leaders' drive to eliminate disruptive behaviour in classrooms and tackle boisterous behaviour as students move between lessons, has yielded rapid results. In those classrooms visited, it was clear that routines for the start and end of lessons are now firmly embedded and, as a result, little learning time is lost due to inappropriate behaviour. All staff are clear about their responsibility for keeping good order and ensuring academy policies in relation to behaviour are applied consistently. As a consequence, the atmosphere around the academy is increasingly calm and purposeful.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Staff and governors are united in their resolve to move the academy out of special measures quickly. The time and effort senior leaders have invested in streamlining the way the curriculum is managed, and the subsequent emergence of the new faculty structure, have led to middle leaders taking much greater responsibility for the quality of teaching and students' outcomes. Inaccuracies in students' attainment and progress data, evident at the previous inspection, are being tackled. Middle leaders check the reliability of the data from their colleagues and teachers within subject areas moderate each other's judgements. Senior leaders have also added an additional layer of quality assurance by having some faculty data checked externally. Further, teachers' use of standardised assessment tasks and common mark schemes is ensuring a much more consistent approach to the way students are assessed. Consequently, senior leaders and heads of faculty say they are much more confident in the quality of the information they have about students' attainment and progress, particularly at Key Stage 4 and, as a result, have a firm foundation on which to hold staff to account robustly for students' outcomes. This has led to senior leaders and governors adopting a much more rigorous approach to performance management where decisions about teachers' pay are linked to students' results.

Since my previous monitoring inspection, middle leaders have undertaken training in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in their faculties. Joint observations of lessons, undertaken with senior leaders, scrutiny of the work in students' books and analyses of students' attainment and progress data are providing a broad range of evidence from which middle leaders can evaluate the quality of their colleagues' work. Teachers whose practice is identified as in need of development are provided with targeted support and training to improve their professional expertise. However, leaders and managers are under no illusions that much remains to be done to bring all teaching in the academy up to the standard of the best, with particular emphasis on increasing the challenge of the work students are given to do in order to fuel their enthusiasm and, as a result, increase their engagement in learning.

Teachers are currently given notice of when they will be formally observed teaching. Consequently, teachers have time to prepare for these observations and, as a result,

senior and middle leaders cannot be certain that these lessons are typical of the quality of teaching over time.

The review of the pupil premium, recommended at the previous inspection, has yet to be carried out. This needs completing as a matter of urgency in order to make sure that the additional funding the academy receives for disadvantaged students is used effectively.

External support

The academy staff have benefited from the support of a number of external sources. These include partnerships with two local successful schools, additional funding from Teaching Schools North West and drawing on the expertise of an independent consultant. This additional support has contributed to building leadership capacity and driving forward developments in, for example, modern foreign languages and mathematics. It is also enabling senior leaders to deliver those aspects of the academy development plan related to improving the quality of teaching and developing the curriculum.