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18 June 2015

Mr Patrick Ferguson
Principal
Hope Academy
Ashton Road
Newton-le-Willows
Merseyside
WA12 0AQ

Dear Mr Ferguson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Hope Academy

Following my visit with Fiona Dixon and Steven Goldsmith, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 16 and 17 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 that have been taken since the academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 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.

The academy may appoint newly qualified teachers into any subject department.

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, the Director of Children's Services for St Helens, the Department for Academies Advisors Unit and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Philippa Darley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching throughout the academy, but especially in Key Stage 3, by:
 - ensuring that teachers continue to develop their subject knowledge to ensure that they are able to teach their subjects with confidence
 - developing teachers' skills in using a range of appropriate strategies to enable them to engage with students and impact more effectively on their learning and progress
 - focusing in lessons on developing students' skills, knowledge and understanding in the subject rather than merely completing tasks
 - ensuring that marking is regular, of high quality and informs students on how they can improve their work.

- Improve the progress and achievement of all groups of students, including those in the sixth form, in all subjects, but especially those students supported by pupil premium, boys and the most able, by:
 - making sure assessment and monitoring of student progress is accurate and rigorous to enable appropriate work to be set in order that good learning can take place
 - checking the progress of individuals and groups of students regularly and robustly so that leaders and teachers can take swift action to address any underachievement
 - providing more opportunities for students to develop and apply their skills in mathematics and writing to other subjects
 - giving higher-level, more demanding work to the more able students.

- Improve the behaviour and safety of students by:
 - eradicating poor behaviour in lessons to ensure that students' opportunities to learn are not compromised through low-level and persistent disruption
 - ensuring that, as a matter of priority, all students involved in off-site education are safe by making sure that their attendance is recorded and reported to the academy within an hour of when they are due to attend each off-site session
 - ensuring that students attend the academy on a regular basis and that any absenteeism is chased up as a matter of routine.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels by:
 - increasing the rigour with which teaching is monitored to ensure that teachers are perfectly clear about which aspects need to be improved and why
 - ensuring that monitoring focuses clearly on how well students learn
 - taking swift action to eradicate inadequate teaching
 - making use of the training, resources and advice offered by the various subject associations to provide subject leaders with the knowledge and expertise to enable them to offer appropriate advice to their colleagues on how to further improve their planning and practice
 - requiring all subject leaders to be fully involved in checking that students are

making good progress in lessons and that teachers' planning promotes learning which builds on previous lessons

- making sure that performance management links teachers' pay progression more closely to improvement in the classroom
- evaluating the impact of the pupil premium funding on students' learning to ensure that it is being spent wisely and provides good value for money
- ensuring that governors act on the recommendations of the forthcoming independent review of governance.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 16 and 17 June 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work. They observed parts of 19 lessons, many of which were jointly observed with the three vice-Principals. They worked with subject leaders to scrutinise a sample of students' work from across the full range of academy subjects. They also looked at some work in classes. Inspectors met with the Principal and with other members of the senior leadership team. These discussions focused on the progress the academy has made since the last monitoring visit. Inspectors met with three groups of students and spoke to others in lessons, and during informal times of the day. Inspectors observed student behaviour, both in classes and around the academy site. They scrutinised a range of documentation relating to achievement, the quality of teaching, behaviour and safeguarding as well as the academy's action plan and plans to improve the sixth form. The lead inspector met with three representatives from the governors' monitoring committee, including the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

Two new vice-Principals took up their posts after Easter. Governors have also temporarily promoted one of the assistant Principals to the post of vice-Principal with oversight of achievement. The head of sixth form has stepped down and this role is now the responsibility of one of the new vice-Principals. The roles of the other vice-principals have also been reorganised. The director of finance has left. A significant number of teaching staff have either resigned, or accepted voluntary redundancy. They will leave the academy at the end of this academic year.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement continues to improve slowly across the academy. A robust system of external and internal moderation has secured the accuracy of teachers' assessment across all subjects. Due to this, leaders are confidently able to show what current students are on track to achieve and are well prepared for reporting against the new school performance measures.

The standards that the current Year 11 is likely to achieve in this summer's exams are unlikely to be as positive as was previously thought. The proportion achieving the benchmark of five good GCSEs including English and mathematics is set to fall this year. However, based on their prior attainment at the end of primary school, these students are actually set to make marginally better progress in English and mathematics than was the case in 2014. This is partly due to their following a more appropriate curriculum, and to improvements in the quality of teaching.

Achievement in science continues to suffer on account of inadequate teaching and significant turnover in staffing. Many students have had repeated changes in teaching staff, and this has had a significant impact on their progress. Work in books, especially at Key Stage 3, shows they are making poor progress.

Subject leaders check on progress four times each year through a mixture of external testing and internal teacher assessment. They map each student's progress against what should be expected. They now use this information to challenge teachers and to identify those students most in need of additional support. Consequently, expectations are rising and the quality of students' work in their books has improved substantially.

Opportunities to develop literacy and mathematical skills are increasing. The mathematics department has installed a prominent 'Word Wall' in each teaching room, in order to highlight mathematical language. Students' workbooks and the academy's curriculum planning documents show that developing literacy and numeracy is a high priority among staff. Subjects such as history, geography and religious education support students in developing extended pieces of writing and in their speaking and listening skills. There is now a whole-school numeracy policy in place and subject leaders have created explicit opportunities for students to apply their mathematical skills in their subjects – for example, data handling and interpretation in physical education and information and communication technology.

The academy continues to refine the 'Gold' standard of work in lessons to ensure that the most able students are challenged and make good progress. Improvements to the use of this were particularly evident in mathematics, where increasingly complex tasks required the most able students to apply their knowledge to solve more demanding problems. However, classroom organisation often gets in the way of these students making good progress. The most able students often do not sit together, so they miss opportunities to collaborate and solve problems when they get stuck. Inspectors observed students sitting for lengthy periods, waiting for their teacher to have time to help them. They confirmed that this frequently happened.

Leaders' tracking of achievement in the sixth form is now in line with practice in the rest of the school. The low attendance of some students has had a detrimental impact on the progress they have made this year. Leaders have raised this robustly with students and far more are now attending for 100% of the time. However, it is too soon to say if this is having a positive impact on the progress they are now making.

The quality of teaching

Teachers have worked closely with school leaders to understand the demands of the new national curriculum. Their plans for September demonstrate they are focusing on building schemes of work that develop learning in depth, as opposed to a content-heavy curriculum where students only ever gain a superficial understanding of their subjects.

The majority of teachers now plan lessons that focus on what they want students to learn, rather than on simply completing tasks. They do so with increasing confidence. Many more teachers now use the 'Bronze, Silver and Gold' learning to improve the level of challenge in lessons. Where this is less successful, teachers simply provide a worksheet for students to complete with little discussion or

opportunity to think about their answers. Some teachers also require students to work through all the levels at the same time. This inhibits the most able from tackling challenging work.

Other teachers enable students successfully to self-select their starting points in lessons. In these cases, students make better progress as the work is more accurately matched to their ability levels.

Marking is regular and gives students helpful advice on how to improve their work. It is particularly effective in the English department. However, at times opportunities are missed for students to act on the advice given. This is because they are not always given the time to do so, or their next piece of work does not enable them to practise the skill their teacher has highlighted. Consequently, there is not enough evidence that marking and feedback are making a substantial difference to the progress students make.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour continues to improve, particularly in lessons. Most students are keen to learn and will stay on task even when they find the work uninteresting. Teachers apply the school behaviour policy well and this almost always prevents any silly behaviour from escalating into anything more serious. However, students say that low-level disruption is not always acted upon by teachers. Because of this, a small number of students are able to disrupt learning across the school day, without any additional sanction.

Students report that behaviour continues to be poor when their classes are taught by temporary staff. This is particularly the case in science.

Attitudes to learning in lessons are improving. The completion and presentation of students' work were much improved at this monitoring visit. However, a number of students in each class are not adequately prepared for learning, forgetting their books or not bringing a pen. This prevents their teachers from making a brisk start to the lesson; it also makes it harder for these students to act on any guidance as their work is kept on pieces of paper.

Behaviour during social times is very positive. Students appreciate the extended lunch time as it gives them chance to 'let off steam' with their friends. Teachers and other staff are visible and provide appropriate levels of supervision both inside and outside the academy building.

Attendance is improving and that of the main school is now almost at the national average. The attendance of sixth formers has also improved by about 10 percentage points overall since the last monitoring visit. There has been a substantial fall in the number of serious sanctions and exclusions. This also reflects the overall improvement to behaviour and attitudes of students.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The leadership is a significant strength of the academy. The newly appointed vice-Principals have added extra capacity and experience to the leadership team. They have had an immediate impact, increasing opportunities for innovation and swiftly improving the quality of provision in the sixth form. Some middle leaders are associated to the senior team, taking on specific areas of responsibility, such as curriculum reform and pupil premium. This not only develops their leadership skills but also brings additional competencies to the team.

Leaders' management of information relating to achievement and attendance is excellent. They have developed an innovative approach to tracking students' progress in line with new national accountability measures. Leaders' routine analysis of progress data affects what happens in the classroom. Teachers and subject leaders can access detailed information on groups of learners; they are now using this to monitor teaching quality and to reshape lesson activities.

Leaders, including governors, have challenged inadequate teaching very effectively. Teachers have been subject to extra monitoring and support. Many have chosen to leave the academy, although some have remained and improved their practice.

The effectiveness of subject leaders has improved significantly since the last monitoring visit. They now use data on achievement to identify which lessons and which groups of learners they want to observe. They conduct monitoring activity with senior leaders, and this has rapidly increased their expertise. Their feedback to teachers is detailed and focuses on the progress highlighted groups make in lessons. The outcome of these observations informs a schedule of weekly subject professional development. Teachers value this alongside the additional development opportunities they receive as a whole staff.

Leaders now have in place a robust plan of action for improving the sixth form. They have secured extensive careers advice and guidance from an external company, which will be based permanently at the academy from next year. This organisation will support students from Year 7 upwards in making informed choices about their future. All sixth-form students have had their study programmes reviewed and checked to ensure that they will enable them to access higher education if they so wish. They have more opportunities to visit universities and receive good support from their teachers in writing applications. The vice-Principal in charge of the sixth form is now working effectively to establish the principles of good sixth-form provision for future years. He is working closely with Year 11 students to ensure they can choose from a broader range of qualifications.

Governors continue to offer a high level of challenge to school leaders. They are not content to accept reports without verifying the facts for themselves. Members of the standards committee use every opportunity to get into lessons to see if improvements are happening on the ground. Their additional challenge to subject leaders has been instrumental in ensuring they are now actively driving improvements in their departments.

External support

A local authority improvement adviser now sits on the governing body and is actively involved in checking on academy improvement in her role within the standards and monitoring committee. The local authority has provided substantial, effective support to the academy in order to resolve staffing issues. It plans to provide an external review of special educational needs provision in the near future.

The academy draws on a number of external organisations to support the development of teaching, the tracking of achievement and the establishment of an academy-wide vision. These have brought much-needed clarity and purpose to these areas of work.

The academy also has links with a number of good and outstanding secondary schools. These provide effective direct support to subject leaders, particularly in the areas of assessment and curriculum planning.