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Mr G Evans
Principal
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Dear Mr Evans

Special measures monitoring inspection of Halewood Academy

Following my visit with Jan Peckett, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 9–10 March 2016, 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in April 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the acting Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in April 2015.

- Swiftly improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least consistently good in order to raise the achievement of all groups of students, particularly in Key Stages 3 and 4 and in English and mathematics, by making sure that:
 - there are high expectations of what students can achieve, including the quantity, quality, care and presentation of students' work
 - students' attitudes to learning are consistently good
 - all staff, including those in the sixth form, regularly and accurately assess students' achievements so they set challenging work that matches the needs and abilities of all groups of students, particularly for disadvantaged students and boys
 - students' literacy and numeracy skills are developed effectively across all subjects
 - all teachers follow the academy's agreed policies and procedures for marking students' work and that clear guidance is given to students on how they can improve their work
 - students in the sixth form make good or better progress in vocational subjects.

- Rapidly improve the impact of leadership and management at all levels, including governance, by ensuring that:
 - there is clear senior leadership responsibility for the leadership of teaching and a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching so that any inadequate practice is swiftly eradicated
 - accurate systems are established for assessing students' achievement to ensure that leaders can confidently check and measure how well their actions improve students' outcomes, including in the sixth form
 - heads of department, including those new to post, are rigorously held to account for checking and improving the quality of teaching and students' achievement in their areas of responsibility
 - the pupil premium funding is used effectively to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students so that the gaps between their achievement with that of others close quickly
 - governors hold leaders rigorously to account for improving students' achievement and the quality of teaching
 - the findings of the recent review of governance are quickly and fully implemented.

- Continue to implement current strategies to improve attendance, particularly in Year 11, so that it is at least in line the national average.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 9–10 March 2016

Evidence

Our inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and other members of staff, groups of pupils and the acting Chair of the Governing Body as well as representatives of the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust and the local authority. Inspectors also held telephone conversations with a number of organisations that offer alternative provision for pupils in Key Stage 4. Inspectors visited a number of lessons and observed the behaviour of pupils around the school. We considered a wide range of documentation including school information on current progress; records of the monitoring of the quality of teaching; minutes of meetings of the executive monitoring board; and records relating to the behaviour and attendance of pupils.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit, there have been a number of changes to leadership of the school and staffing. The Chair of the Governing Body has resigned and an acting Chair has been appointed. Additional governors have also been appointed. The vice-principal is leaving the school at the end of this term to take up a leadership position in another educational establishment. The school is seeking to appoint a new vice-principal for September 2016 but in the interim two assistant vice-principals from the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust will be supporting the Principal. A new head of the mathematics department will take up her position in April and a lead practitioner has also been appointed to this department.

Since the last visit, there has been considerable turbulence in staffing, particularly in mathematics, owing to the long-term absence of a number of teachers. In total, almost one third of the staff in post at the previous inspection have left the school, largely because school leaders now have increased expectations of teachers.

The school is in the final stages of negotiation to become part of the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust. Leaders of Halewood Academy have launched a consultation with stakeholders regarding the future of the sixth form: the proposal under discussion is that the sixth form would close with effect from August 2017.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The Principal has worked with dedication and vision in finalising transition arrangements to become part of the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust. This time-consuming process has nevertheless enabled the school to draw from the immense reserves of talent and expertise in the trust; this has been a key determining factor in driving improvement.

However, the imminent departure of the vice-principal leaves a gap at leadership level that will be a challenge to staunch. The Principal and vice-principal have formed a highly effective team in steering the school in its journey out of special measures. Without doubt, the leadership capacity of the school is now more fragile: it is a matter of great urgency that a suitably challenging and effective replacement be found to fill this pivotal post.

The subject leaders of English and science are exemplary in their evident zeal to leave the stigma of special measures behind. As highly effective leaders, they do not countenance poor performance; they have been immensely influential in embedding a climate of accountability that continues to be instrumental in driving improvement. For example, prompted by our discussions at my previous visit, the heads of department of English, mathematics and science visited local primary schools and were pleasantly surprised by the high standards and expectations that were clearly in evidence. As a result, they have embarked on a major revamp of the Key Stage 3 curriculum because they feel that formerly the work set was too easy and did not build effectively on the foundations laid down in primary school. This preparedness to challenge the status quo has been infectious and has encouraged other subject leaders, such as those of history and geography, to re-examine their schemes of work.

Performance management procedures have been strengthened since my previous visit because all teaching assistants and support staff now have challenging targets that are linked to outcomes for pupils. This has helped to focus all members of the school community on the correct priorities. However, although the pay policy is stringent, there have at times been some weaknesses in its application. Governors have strengthened procedures accordingly so there will be no repetition of such inconsistency.

New leadership of the management of the pupil premium shows promise. The pupil premium is additional government funding designed to support the educational achievement of pupils eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority. This area has been woefully mismanaged in the past and school leaders have had to start from scratch. They have undertaken a full audit of gaps in provision and have drawn up a plan to drive this forward. There are some tentative signs that improvements to the overall quality of teaching are starting to have a positive impact on outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, but there remains much work to be done in this regard.

Governors continue to make a strong contribution to the development of the school. Minutes of meetings of the executive monitoring board demonstrate incisive challenge; it is clear that no stone is left unturned when it comes to ensuring that outcomes for pupils improve rapidly.

Arrangements for safeguarding are effective and on a day-to-day basis pupils are safe in the school. However, not all governors and staff have been trained in the 'Prevent' strategy, which aims to raise awareness of the risks of radicalisation and extremism, and this matter must be addressed speedily before the next monitoring visit.

The decision to go out to consultation about the closure of the sixth form in 2017 was taken with a heavy heart by school leaders. Numbers of recruits to the sixth form have fallen steadily over time and, from a financial perspective, the long-term future of post-16 provision at Halewood Academy does not appear to be sustainable.

However, the manner and timing of the consultation have alarmed many in the local community. Learners in Year 12 are confused about precisely when the sixth form will close. As a result, they are anxious that they will not be able to continue their studies into Year 13 at Halewood, even though they were welcomed into the sixth form as recently as last September. Learners in the sixth form feel loyal to the school and expressed thoughtful reasons why they had elected to pursue their post-16 studies here and not elsewhere. Their disappointment and trepidation regarding their future were palpable to inspectors; furthermore, it seems most unfortunate that such uncertainty should loom just before their impending examinations. The local authority is working with school leaders and the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust to ensure that this situation is rapidly resolved in the best interests of learners currently in Year 12.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The rigorous system to monitor the quality of teaching, embarked on in response to the previous inspection, has now become firmly established. As a result, pupils are the first to admit that there has been a substantial, discernible improvement in teaching. Books are marked frequently and pupils claimed to inspectors that teachers' comments provide good guidance in how to improve their work. Pupils also appreciate the efforts that their teachers make in 'going the extra mile': for example, there are extra revision classes and clubs held most evenings that have really helped pupils to gain a greater understanding and enjoyment of the subjects they are studying.

Since assuming oversight of the mathematics department, the vice-principal has effected substantial improvements to this area of the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers from Wade Deacon High School have been instrumental in supporting the department by modelling good teaching and helping to redesign the scheme of work. Pupils are consulted more frequently about how well they feel they are being taught and, as a result, standards are rising in this subject.

Since the previous inspection, there has been a considerable turnover in staffing. This is because school leaders have challenged poor performance and in some instances this has led to staff leaving or being absent. To some extent, this has had

a deleterious impact because the school has become dependent on temporary staff, particularly in mathematics. There have been moves afoot to sort this out and, reassuringly, the two new appointments to the mathematics department have a track record of success in their previous schools.

Recent appointments to other departments, in addition to the employment of Teach First trainees, have injected 'new blood' into the school, bringing fresh ideas and stronger practice. For example, when I spoke to a member of staff who had come from an outstanding school, it was clear that he was imbued with high expectations of himself and his pupils; this refreshing vigour supports school leaders in their drive for improvement.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils and staff spoken to during the inspection expressed to inspectors a confidence that behaviour is improving. They feel that pupils are more reluctant to disrupt lessons because swift and firm action is taken by staff when poor behaviour occurs. School records on behaviour confirm this point of view and there have been far fewer incidents of repeated offences by individuals, suggesting that sanctions imposed by staff are becoming increasingly effective. Although there has been a rise in fixed-term exclusions compared with the previous year, this is largely because school leaders are taking a much sterner approach to the slightest disruption.

Pupils generally behave well in lessons and around the school. Attitudes to learning were more positive than on previous visits and pupils seem alert in lessons and keen to take part. Pupils are generally very smartly dressed and they take pride in the presentation of their work; during the inspection, there was no evidence of graffiti on pupils' books or around the school.

Attendance has deteriorated since the previous visit. School leaders' efforts to encourage good attendance have been tenacious and most pupils attend regularly and arrive punctually. Unfortunately, a small minority of pupils take far too casual an approach to their own attendance; furthermore, some parents have not been helpful by allowing their children to stay off school for spurious reasons that do not stand up to scrutiny. Such lax attitudes to attendance and punctuality on the part of a small minority of parents do not support their children's chances of finding good employment in the future; it is incontestable that most employers regard previous poor attendance as a hindrance when considering someone for a post.

Pupils say they feel safe in school. Incidences of a racist or homophobic nature are rare and dealt with effectively. Pupils spoken to during the inspection claimed that there is a very open approach to diversity and that most people are relatively broad-minded. Pupils did, however, say that the term 'gay' is sometimes used 'as a joke', although they acknowledged that staff take a strong stance and such language is frowned upon.

Pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 and learners in the sixth form spoke very positively of enlightening careers guidance that has broadened their scope regarding what they would like to do in the future. Pupils whom I met during the visit were considering a wide range of employment or further education opportunities, often flouting stereotypes, that link well with the needs of the local and national economy.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes across the school are improving. On the surface, comparisons between assessment information for this year and that of last year would appear to paint the opposite picture. However, this is because information on pupils' progress last year was wildly inaccurate and procedures to test the veracity of such information lacked rigour. This is no longer the case and the input of the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust has been immeasurably beneficial in this respect. As an outstanding provider, Wade Deacon High School has a very clear perspective on what good outcomes for pupils look like. They have expertly scrutinised Halewood Academy's data, examined pupils' work and observed teaching; as a result, school leaders now have a much more accurate view of pupils' progress because this information is reliable and securely based on evidence. According to this information, pupils currently in Year 11 are on target to achieve much better results in their GCSE examinations than those gained by Year 11 pupils in 2015.

Work seen in pupils' books during the monitoring visit was invariably appropriate to their age and abilities. In subjects such as English, pupils make good progress across all key stages and pupils are now making better progress in mathematics. On the whole, progress continues to be stronger in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3. This is largely because the curriculum in Key Stage 3 has historically lacked challenge and although this is in the process of being addressed, progress in Years 7, 8 and 9 remains inconsistent.

Disadvantaged pupils are starting to make better progress than in the past, but there is still some ground to be made up. Gaps between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and that of other pupils are closing in mathematics but are widening slightly in English, largely because other pupils' progress is improving more swiftly. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 who are on target to achieve five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is greater than at this time last year; therefore the gap between these pupils and other pupils nationally is set to narrow in this key measure.

The progress of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is not consistently good. Their progress is, for the most part, improving in English and mathematics; however, it is more variable in other subjects. The progress in the inclusion school of the small number of young people whose circumstances have made them vulnerable gives considerable cause for concern; in particular, pupils in Year 11 attending this provision have not made any progress whatsoever in English, mathematics and science since the beginning of the year. This is because they have

not received specialist teaching in these subjects and there has been insufficient emphasis on their academic progress.

During the visit, I made telephone contact with external agencies that provide work-related training for pupils for part of the week away from the school. Judging from these conversations, pupils are thriving in their placements and attending well; some have even found employment for when they reach the end of their school career.

According to information provided by the school, learners in Key Stage 5 are on target to achieve better grades in their external examinations this year in , both academic and vocational courses. There are some highly innovative opportunities on offer in the sixth form, such as the chance to do paid internships in industry; as a result, most learners spoken to during the visit had a very clear view of what they wanted to do in the future. They spoke very highly of the support offered to them by their teachers and the tuition they receive in their chosen courses.

External support

The support and challenge provided by the Wade Deacon Innovation Enterprise Trust continues to be of immense benefit to Halewood Academy. The trust provides clear, strategic leadership and has been pivotal in driving improvement. Teachers from the trust have worked most productively with teachers in the school, coaching them, sharing schemes of work and checking the accuracy of assessment information. As a result of this intervention, the school is improving apace. The local authority maintains a strong connection with the school and has taken the initiative in attempting to work with school leaders to resolve issues relating to sixth-form provision.

Priorities for further improvement are as follows:

- Ensure that the current fragility at senior leadership level is rapidly resolved with the appointment of a suitably challenging and effective vice-principal.
- Continue to drive improvements in attendance by engaging more effectively with the small minority of parents who do not send their children to school on a regular basis.
- Ensure that all governors and staff have had training in the 'Prevent' strategy.
- Immediately enhance the quality of provision for the small number of vulnerable pupils attending the inclusion school.
- Rapidly resolve the current uncertainty relating to sixth-form provision by engaging with all stakeholders, including learners, parents and the local authority, so that a solution is found that has the best interests of learners in Year 12 at heart.