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Mrs Helen McCormick
Acting Headteacher
Haydon Bridge High School
Haydon Bridge
Hexham
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Dear Mrs McCormick

Special measures monitoring inspection of Haydon Bridge High School

Following my visit with Alexandra Hook, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 15 and 16 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 December 2014. 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joan Hewitt

Senior Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2014

- Safeguarding procedures across the whole school, including the sixth form, require immediate attention by urgently:
 - improving systems to record, maintain and retrieve information relating to all behaviour and safety incidents, complaints and concerns
 - securing staff knowledge about child protection and ways of reporting any concerns which may arise.

- Urgently improve the progress made by all learners and close the gaps in the progress between all groups within the school and nationally, particularly the most able, those with special educational needs or disability and the disadvantaged, by:
 - embedding a whole-school approach to the teaching of literacy, and specifically writing, so that it is taught effectively across the curriculum
 - improving learners' attitudes to learning by ensuring consistently high expectations of the quality of their notes in books in all subjects and key stages
 - ensuring that those in need of additional support improve rapidly to keep up with their classmates, and those who are most able are challenged to achieve higher levels in all subjects
 - ensuring that all teachers and leaders use the data they have on learners' performance effectively to improve the planning for the support and challenge of learners in lessons.

- Continue to improve learners' attendance and, for those learners who are absent, instigate a procedure whereby, on their return, they are able and are prompted to catch up on work they have missed so that there are no gaps in their learning and notes.

- Improve leadership and management, including governance, by:
 - urgently reviewing and improving the school's procedures for maintaining records relating to behaviour and safety so that they are compliant and fit for purpose
 - securing rapidly the permanent leadership of the sixth form so that the necessary improvements can be made
 - monitoring the spending of the pupil premium funding so that the learners this fund is designed to support benefit from improved provision so that the gaps in their attainment, in comparison to that of their peers, close rapidly
 - ensuring that staff roles and responsibilities are clear and shared, especially for those responsible for child protection and for teaching assistants.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

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

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 March 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, groups of pupils and the vice-chair of the interim executive board (IEB). Inspectors also had discussions with subject leaders and senior staff, including the consultant headteacher. One inspector spoke with the chair of the IEB on the telephone and met with a representative from the local authority. The lead inspector met with the interim executive headteacher for the North East, commissioned by the school's prospective sponsor, Bright Tribe. Inspectors visited lessons and looked at pupils' work. The impact of the school's work with sixth-form learners was not a focus of this inspection.

Context

The school's plans to become an academy in April have been delayed and the appointment of a substantive headteacher has also been postponed. There has been a small number of staff on long-term sickness absence, some of whom have returned to work either full- or part time.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The pace of improvement is too slow, and leaders and managers have failed to make significant improvements. The headteacher and other senior leaders have shown commitment and loyalty to the school throughout this difficult period in the school's journey. Nevertheless, they have failed to secure rapid improvement and pupils do not receive an effective education.

The uncertainty about the school's future following delays to the plans to become an academy has unsettled leaders and staff. The impact of the withdrawal of plans to appoint a substantive headteacher also cannot be underestimated. Gaps in leadership capacity and budget limitations have all contributed to the school treading water at best. This unacceptable state of affairs is resulting in the pupils of the school being very badly served indeed.

Staffing is more secure but teachers' absence is an ongoing problem, leading the school to rely on the services of supply staff. In some instances, pupils have valued the effective teaching of temporary teachers. However, more commonly, supply teaching is not of a consistently high quality. When this happens, pupils become disenchanted, continuity is lost and progress stalls.

Leaders have had only limited success in improving the quality of teaching. There is still a core of inadequate teaching that fails to engage pupils and does little to stretch the most able or to support pupils who have special educational needs or disability. The quality of teaching varies too widely and a culture of low expectations persists. Pupils do experience some super teaching, but equally, other experiences

are extremely poor. Leaders have not been successful in securing a critical mass of better teaching.

The encouraging start made by the new team of curriculum leaders has continued in some areas. Where this is working well, curriculum leaders have embraced their new responsibilities and are regularly checking on the quality of teachers' and pupils' work. However, there are clear weaknesses in important subjects such as mathematics and science, which have been hampered by staff absence. The school has also been unable to appoint a permanent special educational needs coordinator.

The new system of leaders acting as learning mentors for disadvantaged pupils has become more established. Pupils value this extra support on the whole; however, their progress generally lags behind that of their peers and this gap is not closing with sufficient speed.

The school's systems for safeguarding pupils continue to meet requirements. The recording of relevant checks on staff is also secure. Leaders are currently reviewing how this information is stored. A new designated child protection leader has been appointed from existing staffing. She has made a sound start. Staff training is up to date; however, checks to make sure staff are using their training effectively are underdeveloped.

The IEB continues to offer sharp challenge and hold leaders to account. It has kept a close eye on action planning and insisted that measurable 'milestones' were added to the revised plan. This makes it easier for members of the IEB to judge the progress made by the school. The chair and vice-chair of the IEB continue to help by using their professional skills to support the school. However, this has not resulted in sustained or significant improvements. Without permanent, high-quality senior and middle leadership, it is difficult to see how the school can make the required improvements at a fast enough pace.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teachers' expectations of what pupils can do remain too low. As was noted in the previous monitoring inspection, there are pockets of good practice where teachers use assessment information effectively to plan tasks that take account of pupils' abilities and previous learning. In these areas, pupils are lively and engaged and they make better progress. In these examples, teachers pay particular attention to supporting pupils who have special educational needs or disability with tailored tasks or close teaching. However, this high-quality work is not consistent or widespread, and consequently there are wide gaps in the progress made by different groups of pupils. Better teaching tends to be confined to islands of positive practice rather than being the norm. Teachers are generally working hard and want to improve their practice. However, inconsistencies in the quality of the curriculum and senior leaders' work to drive this improvement, along with staff absence, have resulted in only modest improvements that are neither significant nor sustained.

Teachers do not offer enough challenge to the most-able pupils. There are some worrying examples in pupils' work books that fail to build on the skills pupils have already established. For example, pupils who can already write in full paragraphs had been given work where all they need to do is fill in a missing word. Other examples include lessons where the teacher allows pupils to sit and read rather than engage with work set, and others in which pupils complete undemanding tasks with ease and are then asked by the teacher to 'help' others.

Pupils' attitudes to learning have not improved significantly. On the whole, pupils tend to contribute to discussions only when asked to do so. Many pupils are too easily satisfied with doing the minimum. This is further exacerbated when teachers do not make sure that everyone joins in. There are some fine examples of thoughtful questioning by teachers, which supports pupils of widely differing abilities, but there is not enough of this quality. Pupils report that a significant minority of pupils are 'trouble-makers'. Pupils say that teachers do deal with this mainly low-level disruption but that it results in teachers being distracted from the job in hand.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour continues to be generally calm and conduct around the school at break- and lunchtimes is more peaceful. Staff have clamped down on pupils' casual use of foul language and as a result, fixed-term exclusions remain high. Pupils have mixed views on the success of this approach and say that staff are inconsistent in tackling pupils when they hear bad language.

Pupils' attendance continues to be an area of grave concern. While there has been a modest improvement in overall attendance, it remains very low. More concerning is the exceptionally high proportion of pupils who are persistently absent and this shows little sign of improvement. The school faces particular difficulties posed by rural isolation and the long distances many pupils travel to attend school. For example, if pupils have to attend medical appointments near their home, getting to school for the remainder of the day can be difficult if they rely on public transport. The school is taking appropriate actions to encourage good attendance and there are some telling examples where this has been successful, but overall there has not been enough improvement.

Pupils who have experienced lengthy absences say that they are well cared for and staff are on hand to support them while they are absent and on their return. The school's systems to help pupils who have been absent to catch up on the work they have missed are inconsistent and very much dependent on the approach of individual staff. Some teachers have a systematic approach and pupils are well supported in making up lost ground, but equally there are cases when this is not tackled well and gaps in pupils' learning are not tackled effectively.

Outcomes for pupils

Assessment information is becoming more reliable. Teachers are routinely asked to explain what they have considered when they check pupils' progress. This is helping the school to form a more accurate picture of how well pupils are doing. The school's most recent assessment information shows some improvement in pupils' progress. However, this improving picture is not always supported by the quality of work in pupils' books. There are still worrying gaps for boys, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability, with no clear signs that these gaps are closing consistently or quickly.

Pupils' ability to write at length is continuing to develop in some areas but remains inconsistent. Pupils who have difficulty with spelling are asked to practise in line with the school's marking policy. However, when this does not help, pupils are not given further help and there is no consistent teaching of spelling strategies. The new curriculum leader for English, who is also the lead for literacy, has made a start in promoting reading, but it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of these new schemes. The progress pupils make in mathematics remains a weakness. Pupils practise various skills but do not systematically develop fluency and confidence in applying their skills to solving problems.

External support

The local authority continues to support leadership through brokering the ongoing services of the consultant headteacher. This has led to some modest improvements in the quality of teaching, but improvement is not rapid and the quality of teaching remains too variable.

The local authority has been wrong-footed by the sudden delay in the school's plans to become an academy and the subsequent delay in the appointment of a substantive headteacher. Officers are acutely aware that the current leadership arrangements are not working and radical action is required to secure the school's future.