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Mr Gary Douglas
Interim Principal
Ashington High School Sports College
Green Lane
Ashington
Northumberland
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Dear Mr Douglas

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ashington High School Sports College

Following my visit with Jamie Kilner and Lucie Stephenson, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 23 and 24 September 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 2015. 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 school is taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint up to three newly qualified teachers in total before the next monitoring inspection in English, mathematics or science subjects.

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 Director of Children and Adult Services for Northumberland County Council.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2015

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so progress is at least good for all students by:
 - ensuring the school sets realistic targets for students and that assessment is used by teachers to plan and teach lessons at the right level for different groups of students
 - ensuring teachers mark students' work more frequently and more accurately so students are aware of the next steps they need to take to improve.
- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by:
 - ensuring that the senior leaders' and governors' evaluation of how well the school is doing is accurate and realistic, and is used to target actions more effectively to bring about rapid improvement
 - implementing a rigorous system to evaluate and improve the quality of teaching throughout the school, using information about students' attainment and progress, and the quality of their class work and homework, in addition to observations of lessons
 - making better use of performance management to improve teachers' classroom practice and to hold teachers rigorously and robustly to account for students' achievement
 - ensuring leaders and managers at all levels frequently and rigorously analyse the progress that all groups of students are making, taking prompt action to tackle underachievement
 - checking that students who are supported by the government's pupil premium funding receive targeted support that accelerates their progress and narrows the difference in their attainment and that of other students in school and nationally
 - analysing more thoroughly all information gathered in the school, including attendance data, and using this to target actions to raise attendance and reduce persistent absence
 - ensuring governors understand and use a range of sources of evidence on the school's performance to enable them to provide an appropriate level of challenge to senior leaders and hold them to account.

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 second monitoring inspection on 23 to 24 September 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers. They observed learning in 22 lessons, eight of which were carried out jointly with two senior leaders in the school. They spoke formally to three groups of students and talked informally to others in lessons and at break and lunchtime during the two-day visit. Inspectors also held discussions with three representatives of the governing body of the Ashington Learning Trust and a senior officer from Northumberland County Council's school improvement service.

Context

Ashington High School has undergone significant change since the first monitoring inspection in April 2015. It is now a secondary school that takes students from Year 7 rather than from Year 9. The school day has been reorganised to manage the additional year groups. A number of teachers and senior leaders left the school in August, including the Principal. Forty new staff have joined the school, of whom 20 are teaching staff. Three new vice-principals have been appointed alongside an associate vice-principal appointed in a temporary capacity. The senior vice-principal is now the interim Principal. Discussions continue to take place with the Department of Education for a sponsor with a plan for the school to become an academy in 2016.

Outcomes for pupils

Evidence from lesson observations, students' books, school information and discussions with students indicate that current students' progress in the majority of lessons is hastening and more are working to the levels expected of them. However, there remain inconsistencies in the progress different groups of students are making in lessons, particularly lower-ability students in English, where work set is not always appropriate to their needs. The vice-principal for teaching and learning has identified weaknesses in some teachers' use of assessment to plan lessons and there is currently a drive to tackle this.

Summer 2015 GCSE results improved from the previous year. However, they confirmed findings from the January 2015 inspection that leaders' then assessments of students' achievements were inaccurate. Provisional data indicate that the proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, improved by over five percentage points from 2014, which was a positive step forward. At 43%, this was still below average and well below the school's predictions of 58%. There was still too much variation in the achievements of different groups of students. Where the school put its efforts to raise achievement of groups such as boys and disadvantaged pupils, there was improvement but this

appears to have been to the detriment of some other groups. For example, the gap between boys' and girls' achievements reversed this year with a higher proportion of boys gaining five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, than girls. Boys' results were nearly 20% above last year's and girls' around 10% below. Results for disadvantaged students rose by 14 percentage points while those for non-disadvantaged students improved minimally. Despite improvement, disadvantaged students' achievements were well below predictions. The gap between the achievements of students with a disability or special educational needs and other students was wider than that found last year.

The proportion of students making expected progress from Key Stage 2 to the end of Key Stage 4 improved in English but, as in mathematics, the proportion remained well below average. The proportion making better than expected progress was far too low. This is not least due to the legacy of poor teaching and past inaccuracies in assessment of this group of students' work.

Outcomes in the sixth form continue to improve and results for students taking vocational courses are strong. Leaders accept that, although improving, academic performance is not good enough. They are taking action to tackle this and have recently appointed a senior leader to help drive improvement. Students report they enjoy sixth form and most stay on to complete their courses. They value the good-quality teaching, support and guidance provided by the school staff. They also speak maturely about improvements since the last monitoring inspection. Students are encouraged to be aspirational about their futures and students who left in the summer have made successful transitions to their chosen education, employment or training destinations. Two thirds have moved on to universities across the country.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Work undertaken to improve the quality of teaching and learning in lessons is making a positive difference to the progress current students are making in class. Students report that teaching is improving and they are working harder and more consistently in lessons. Coaching, mentoring and visiting outstanding practice are part of the vice-principal's (teaching and learning) strategy to improve teaching. Judgements on the quality of teaching are more accurate because they draw on a wide range of information. This includes scrutiny of individual students' achievements, workbooks and discussions with them. Leaders use this information to conduct more rigorous performance management arrangements that are beginning to hold teachers to account more robustly for the achievements of students across the school. Improvement in the quality of teaching led to some improvement in outcomes for students leaving Year 11 in summer 2015, but not enough to tackle the history of underachievement for this group. Leaders know more still needs to happen to improve the quality and consistency in all subjects and lessons to bring all teaching up to that of the best. Some teachers are still not using the regular information they gather about their students' achievements to set work that helps

them to move on quickly from their current levels of ability. This is particularly the case for the least-able students. The quality of students' work in the sixth form was good in all lessons observed and this is not least due to the good-quality teaching they receive.

The continued drive to improve the quality and usefulness of marking and feedback to students is contributing to the improvements in learning. Students and teachers report how much this has improved and, in many classes, feedback is clear and helpful in identifying what students are doing well and what they need to correct or improve. Most teachers provide time to enable students to respond to teachers' comments, correct their work or practise a skill before they move on to the next piece of work. Some teachers are adept at providing an added challenge in their comments when work has been completed successfully.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Strategies to improve attendance are starting to have a positive impact and attendance rates are moving in the right direction. Although improving, there is still much to do to ensure the persistent absence rates of disadvantaged students are at least in line with other students. The recently appointed vice-principal for pastoral support is implementing strategies to improve matters and to reduce the proportion of students excluded temporarily. It is still too soon to see the impact of this work.

Staff and students welcome recent changes to the school's behaviour policy. Students report that they are clear about their behaviour targets and the rewards and consequences within the new policy. They report that most teachers use the policy's 'four-step approach' fairly. They also report that lessons are rarely disrupted by inappropriate behaviour. The recently developed 'positive discipline time' at the end of the school day is aimed at helping students to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours over time. However, some post-16 students consider this to be wasted time. Sixth form students act maturely and responsibly and leaders accept that the approach needs to be revisited.

Students look exceptionally smart in their new uniforms and arrive promptly to lessons ready to learn, with the right equipment. They usually settle down quickly and most work together well in groups or independently. Students' behaviour as they move around the school site is orderly and calm. Potential pressure points in corridors with the additional numbers of students now in school are managed well. Students chat together in a friendly manner in the hall and outside areas at breaktimes and lunchtime and leave no litter around the site. They are polite and keen to share their views with inspectors. Those who met inspectors spoke eloquently, maturely and were great ambassadors for the school. Younger students were full of praise for the school's work to secure successful transitions from their middle schools to Years 7 and 8. They spoke highly of the welcome, care and support offered by staff and other students. They reported confidently that there are

plenty of adults around to help them if they have a query or concern. Students particularly value the range of support on offer from the care and guidance team.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The interim Principal and senior leaders continue to secure actions to tackle key weaknesses identified at the time of the inspection in January 2015. Middle leaders report that they have embraced the challenges and the new opportunities to be part of a team that has a clear focus on improving the life chances of students. They welcome the professional dialogue and the resulting increased accountability for their work and its impact on the students in their charge. Staff report that performance management arrangements are much more robust and ensure they focus on the achievements of all their students and not just those in Years 11 and 13.

The school's 'raising achievement plan', judged not fit for purpose in April, is now a useful tool, identifying the actions and priorities for the school's journey out of special measures. It contains targets that can be measured, timescales by which actions must be completed and milestones to show what must be achieved at key points along the way. Leaders' views on the effectiveness of their work are based more accurately on evidence of what is currently working well and what needs to improve. Data and information provided to governors in leaders' self-evaluation reports are regularly updated. Simple graphs and tables show the trends over each half term or monthly in some cases. Information includes trends in students' progress, fixed period exclusions and attendance rates for all year groups. It also includes attendance information about different groups within the school such as disadvantaged students and students with a disability or special educational needs. Accompanying written commentary occasionally focuses too much on what the school is doing rather than what the data is actually indicating. Nevertheless, the recent improvements in the accuracy of information are ensuring that actions are more clearly focused on what needs to happen to drive the school forward.

Governors now understand that leaders' views of students' achievements have been too generous in the past, as evidenced in the significant gap between teachers' predictions and actual results at Key Stage 4 in summer 2015. This confirmed that poor results in 2014 were not just a 'blip' as had been reported to them. The regular information provided to governors on Key Stage 4 students' progress last year continued to give them confidence that students' achievements would be at least similar to that found nationally in 2015. This proved not to be the case.

Governors have more first-hand evidence of what is going on in the school through regular visits and discussions. Their own action plan to improve their effectiveness is an integral part of the school's raising achievement plan. Special-interest governors are beginning to carry out reviews of faculties with leaders. Governors continue to benefit from the external support and reviews of the quality of work in the school

from leaders from two outstanding secondary schools, Churchill and John Spence. Governors have not been well served by a summer 2015 report from the Ashington Learning Partnership Trust that was overgenerous in its view of the school's improvements. This was because it was based on the inaccurate predictions for Key Stage 4 GCSE results. Consequently, governors had the mistaken impression that the school could be judged to be improving rapidly. While this inspection recognises improvements made, they are not yet at a rapid stage.

The governing body's school advisory group (SAG), which includes local authority senior officer representation, receives monthly information on the progress, attendance and exclusion information for Year 9 to Year 13 students. It has set systems in place to receive similar information about the new Year 7 and Year 8 pupils. The group also monitors the progress of actions in the school's raising achievement plan. Recent reviews are becoming more based on the evaluation of impact and not just, as in the past, on checks to see if actions are completed.

External support

Support and advice from leaders of the two outstanding schools, and visits to these schools, has enabled a range of staff, middle and senior leaders to learn from outstanding practice. This practice is being used in school and is contributing to improvements in the quality of teaching and the hastening progress students are currently making in class. Leaders and governors value the regular local authority support and challenge from the designated senior officer attached to the school. They report the robust challenge he provides in the monthly SAG meetings is ensuring they are held to account for the impact of actions they are undertaking to drive improvement and in identifying what has to happen next. The officer is shortly to undertake a review of the mathematics faculty and carry out observations of lessons with the vice-principal for teaching and learning, as part of the planned challenge and support.