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Helen McCormick
Haydon Bridge Community High School and Sports College
Haydon Bridge
Hexham
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Dear Helen McCormick

Special measures monitoring inspection of Haydon Bridge Community High School and Sports College

Following my visit with Debbie Redshaw, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Alexandra Hook, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 21 and 22 June 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 fourth 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 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. 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 who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils, 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 21 and 22 June 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim executive principal, the acting headteacher, groups of pupils and the vice-chair and chair of the interim executive board (IEB). Inspectors also had discussions with subject leaders and senior staff. One inspector met with a representative from the local authority and two educational welfare officers. The lead inspector met with the director of schools for the prospective sponsor, Bright Tribe. Inspectors visited lessons and looked at pupils' work.

Context

The school's plans to become an academy are on track for September 2016. An executive principal has been appointed by the school's prospective sponsor, Bright Tribe, for September. An interim executive principal who was appointed in March is supporting the acting headteacher. The consultant headteacher is no longer working with the school, and 11 teachers are leaving the school at the end of term, including an assistant headteacher and two subject leaders. Eight new teachers are joining the school in September and the school is in the process of recruiting another teacher. A temporary leader is supporting the school's work with pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Improvements are beginning to gather pace after an excruciatingly slow start. There is a palpable sense of relief in the school and an air of optimism is beginning to grow. Plans for the school to become an academy are now well advanced and this has had a buoyant effect on the school community. The interim executive principal has hit the ground running, bringing with him some much-needed structure and a determination that the school must improve quickly.

In the short time since the previous monitoring visit, the interim executive principal has been effective in working alongside the acting headteacher to gain an accurate view of the quality of teaching and has begun to raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can do. Each teacher has been provided with an evaluation of their work drawn from lesson observations, the quality of pupils' work and discussions with pupils. Leaders have then worked with teachers to draw up targets. Leaders are now in the process of designing bespoke professional development to support teachers in improving their work and to provide opportunities to share good practice.

While the new work to improve teaching is at an early stage, it is already showing some signs of impact. For example, teachers are consistently identifying which pupils are most able and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Displays in classrooms have improved and darker corridors have been painted, bringing a sense of care and pride to the school.

That said, there is still a tremendous amount of work facing leaders to ensure that pupils receive a consistently good standard of education. Leaders and the IEB are under no illusions about the scale of the task ahead.

The school now has a full-time special educational needs coordinator. She has worked with a temporary leader, who is employed by the school's prospective sponsor, to complete a thorough audit of the provision for pupils who have special educational needs. The audit exposed worrying lapses in the school's statutory duties; for example, annual reviews for some pupils had not been completed. Leaders responded swiftly and the statutory duties are now met. Further work to make sure that all pupils with special educational needs are receiving the support they need is under way. However, it is early days and teachers do not always have the skills needed to help pupils with additional learning needs in the classroom. Pupils' books show that teachers expect too little from low-ability pupils and those who have special educational needs.

Issues such as the lack of dedicated leadership time have delayed the improvements to the sixth form. The sixth-form leader is aware of the challenges the school faces and he is beginning to work with the interim executive principal on a strategic approach to improvement. However, currently there are weaknesses in the leadership of the sixth form. For example, while attendance is tracked on a whole-school level, it is not tackled for the sixth form specifically and this hampers improvements in learners' attendance.

Middle leaders are continuing to improve their skills. They are learning from senior leaders by conducting joint observations of learning. Curriculum plans are not always sequential or designed to build pupils' skills and understanding logically. As a result, pupils do not always appreciate the relevance of their work or how different units link together. This somewhat haphazard approach is further compounded when teachers are absent. This is because pupils are taught one-off lessons by supply teachers that do not build on their previous learning, leaving pupils confused and slowing their progress.

Safeguarding systems continue to meet requirements and to improve so that systems are understood and applied more consistently. Occasionally, recording is not precise and this leads to work being repeated unnecessarily. The designated child protection leader, who was newly appointed prior to the previous monitoring inspection, is leaving at the end of term. A new, experienced lead has been appointed and leaders have made secure arrangements for this transition.

The IEB took decisive action following the last monitoring visit. It revisited the school's improvement plan, implemented a refreshed steering group and organised an extension to the services of the interim executive principal so that he is in school full time. This has had a galvanising effect on the whole school community. Minutes of meetings demonstrate that members of the IEB are consistent in offering sharp challenge to school leaders.

The strengthened leadership team is already showing early signs of impact in three critical areas: first, by improving the work for pupils who have special educational needs and developing stronger systems to support them. Second, leaders have been successful in reducing the number of incidents of poor behaviour and bullying. Finally and most crucially, teaching is beginning to improve. Important foundations have been laid and improvements to the school are finally beginning to take shape.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Improvements to the quality of teaching are beginning to gather pace. Teachers are more consistent in attempting to meet the needs of pupils with different abilities by using assessment information. While this is not always successful, it is a positive improvement. In lessons, teachers offer pupils tasks which have different levels of challenge. However, pupils sometimes decide to select the easier option and this is not always spotted by teachers. When this happens, pupils do not make enough progress.

Pupils' attitudes to learning show signs of improvement. They are generally amenable and do the work that has been set. However, there is little in the way of eagerness to learn, and consequently, teachers often work harder than pupils in their efforts to engender a sense of enthusiasm. Teachers are becoming more successful in making sure that more pupils answer questions, sometimes adopting a 'no hands up' approach so that the teacher can test out pupils' understanding. This approach is becoming more commonplace but is not consistent across the school.

Work in pupils' books shows that the most able pupils are generally being challenged in more lessons, but the provision of challenge is not consistent in all subjects. In mathematics, there are too few opportunities for pupils to deepen their understanding by finding new ways of applying their skills.

Teachers' feedback to pupils sometimes leads to improvement in the quality of pupils' work, but teachers frequently fail to check that pupils have followed up their teacher's advice. A further difficulty occurs when teachers guide a pupil in how to improve their work but do not provide the opportunity for the pupil to put it into practice. For example, in a history book, a Year 8 pupil was asked to add the views of other people to his analysis, but the following lessons did not give pupils the opportunity to discuss alternative views.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour around the school buildings continues to be calm. Pupils report that there is still some disruption to lessons, mainly due to off-task talking and some cheekiness towards teachers. Parents also express concern about pupils' behaviour. However, recently introduced systems for recording behaviour incidents have improved and these records show that the number of incidents is falling. Pupils agree that there has been some improvement, although they still point to inconsistencies in teachers applying rules.

The school launched a fresh approach to behaviour and expectations during this inspection. The new system was greeted positively by Year 9 pupils. Senior leaders' plans are underpinned by sensible approaches for administrative support and monitoring arrangements to make sure that everybody takes a consistent line. However, it is clearly too early to evaluate the effectiveness of the new approach.

Pupils' attendance remains an area of serious concern. Rates of pupils' absence and the numbers of pupils who are persistently absent remain stubbornly and exceptionally high. The school's thorough information about pupils' absences shows that there is a great deal of variation between different year groups and for different groups of pupils. For example, disadvantaged pupils' absence remains higher than that of their peers. There are some difficult and intractable cases; nevertheless, the school accepts that this level of persistent absence is unacceptable.

Systems for ensuring that pupils are up to date with their work after a lengthy absence are starting to develop. Pupils are supported in catching up by working closely with a designated member of staff. When pupils have been absent for a shorter period of time, a few teachers have a clear and simple approach to logging which work pupils have missed and have a systematic process of helping them catch up. However, this excellent practice is not widespread.

Outcomes for pupils

The school's assessment information continues to strengthen and provide leaders and teachers with an increasingly accurate picture of pupils' progress. The school's information suggests that the progress made by pupils in Year 11 improved rapidly in the run-up to the examinations as a result of targeted support and extra classes. However, the gaps noted in the report following the previous monitoring visit for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs remain wide.

Leaders' checks on pupils' progress in Year 10 indicate that progress is more positive and they attribute this to timely interventions when pupils' progress slows. This careful tracking is helping leaders to offer disadvantaged pupils additional support at an early stage. Current information suggests that the gap between the progress made by disadvantaged pupils compared with their peers is closing.

Leaders' tracking of pupils' progress in foundation subjects at key stage 3 is less well developed and the system sometimes masks underachievement. Work in pupils' books is generally of a poorer quality than that suggested by the school's assessments. Leaders accept this, and plans to implement a new tracking system from September are under way.

Pupils with weak reading skills are being identified more systematically. Where pupils do have weak skills, they have tailored, systematic support. This is having some success in helping pupils improve their skills. School leaders accept that promoting a love of reading more generally across the school has not been tackled with the same vigour.

There are increasing opportunities for pupils to write at length in different subjects. However, there are still examples of pupils who can write fluently and at length being asked to complete writing tasks which involve writing superficial responses in small boxes on printed sheets, which limits pupils' progress in developing their skills.

External support

The school's prospective sponsor has provided additional leadership capacity through the appointment of the interim executive principal and additional leadership support for pupils who have special educational needs. These appointments have already demonstrated early signs of success. The local authority has reduced its support in the run-up to the school becoming an academy. The contribution from the local authority lies mainly in providing members of the IEB, which has improved its effectiveness in sharpening the school's action plan and holding leaders to account.