

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Gary Douglas
Interim principal
Ashington High School
Green Lane
Ashington
Northumberland
NE63 8DH

Dear Mr Douglas

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ashington High School

Following my visit to your school on 12 July 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 January 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 before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 12 July 2016

Evidence

This monitoring inspection took place over one day. The inspector focused only on the leadership and management aspects of the areas for improvement identified at the time of the inspection in January 2015. The inspector held meetings with the interim principal and senior leadership team, a group of teachers and a representative from Northumberland County Council. Discussions were held with three governors and a group of Year 9 and 10 pupils. The inspector carried out short observations of learning with a senior leader. She also spoke informally to pupils in lessons and at breaktime to gather their views on the school's improvements. A range of documents was scrutinised including the school's evaluation of its own effectiveness, the school improvement plan, reviews of the actions within the plan and minutes from meetings of the governing body.

Context

There have been a number of changes to the teaching force since the last visit. Nineteen members of staff have either left or are leaving at the end of the summer term; three of them have moved on to promoted posts. A new temporary governing body was constituted at the beginning of March 2016. The school has changed the way lunchtime operates. It is not split into two sessions and, as a result, there is a longer break for pupils. The 10-minute session at the end of each day, behaviour management time, has been adjusted. The school is no longer part of the Ashington Learning Partnership and is a stand-alone foundation school. To date, there has been no decision which multi-academy trust the school will join.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders remain energised by the journey out of special measures. They are continuing to drive improvement effectively. Systems and processes developed over the past year are being embedded across the school more widely. Middle leaders are growing in confidence and report how they are empowered to be fully involved in the monitoring and evaluation of their own specialist areas and the wider work of the school. They have been trained and supported by external consultants and leaders to develop their effectiveness in this broader role well. The senior team are reflective and honest in the appraisal of their work and know there is still more to do to ensure the school's successful passage out of special measures. Leaders are also aware that 25% new staff joining the school in September will bring its own challenges and opportunities. However, staff who joined the school last September report that they settled in quickly, were supported well and are contributing to the school's ongoing improvements successfully.

Detailed reports to governors show leaders' more accurate, regular review of teaching, pupils' work and teachers' use of assessment to identify progress and plan future learning. Development points for teachers following reviews are identified and tackled through coaching, training or support plans where necessary. Leaders know there is still some way to go to ensure all staff embrace the school's high

expectations. Target setting for pupils is now appropriately challenging and pupils' progress towards achieving their targets is checked regularly. Pupils report that they know their targets and this, along with the written feedback they usually receive on their work, gives them a good idea of how well they are doing and what they need to aim for next. There are still occasions when teachers do not follow the school's marking and feedback policy well enough and pupils' work is not checked regularly for understanding, mistakes, tidiness, quality or product. There are also occasions when leaders have not tackled this weakness quickly enough.

Most teachers are more accomplished in using the assessments they make on pupils' learning to plan activities to move them on quickly. Where this is successful, it contributes to engaging and purposeful activities. However, a few teachers are still resistant to change. Additionally, a number of pupils report that they have had too many supply teachers this year who do not always provide activities that will help them to move on successfully in their learning. When leaders report to governors on the quality of teaching in school, they do not take account of the lessons taken by short-term supply teachers. This gives an over-generous view of its quality and impact. The appointment of a full complement of staff is aimed to reduce the need for significant numbers of supply teachers from September 2016. Robust procedures are tackling the remaining weaknesses in the quality of teaching.

Teachers report on the continuing, increased rigour in leaders' arrangements to check the quality and impact of their performance. They value the training and support provided to build their skills and keep up to date with their specialisms. Regular half-termly meetings with senior leaders check how well pupils are doing and then require teachers to reflect on what actions they will take to help pupils who are not achieving as well as they should to catch up to where they need to be. Information from these meetings is also being used more effectively to identify additional small-group activities away from the main lesson to help pupils having difficulty with an area of work to catch up.

Work to improve attendance across the school is making more of a mark and attendance rates are moving slowly towards those found nationally. Careful analysis of attendance and persistent absence rates by individual pupils and groups takes place and findings are reported to governors. Comparative information over time, and against national averages where possible, is provided. However, written commentary in reports does not focus well enough on the differences between groups and whether gaps are narrowing between boys and girls, disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and other pupils. Narrowing gaps between different groups of pupils was identified as a key area for improvement at the last inspection. Data clearly shows that while attendance rates of all pupils are rising, rates for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are still well below those of their peers and below national averages. Gaps also remain between the progress these pupils are making in English and mathematics compared to the progress of others.

Leaders continue to improve the accuracy of assessments of pupils' learning and predictions of their achievements at the end of Year 11. Governors rightly have a

healthy scepticism about Year 11 predictions, given the past inaccurate track record, but it is clear that leaders are not depending on their own, or their teachers' assessments alone. They have involved commercial companies, local schools and consultants to check their findings. Current tracking suggests that a just below average proportion will gain a good GCSE in English and mathematics and the progress pupils will make from their starting points will be nearer to that found nationally. This would represent significant improvement from 2015.

The temporary governing body have 'hit the deck running'. Governors have built rapidly on the improvements seen in governance at the last monitoring visit. They bring a wealth of experience, skills and a shared passion with leaders to do the best for the pupils in Ashington High. Governors quickly got to grips with, and understood, the detailed and transparent information provided by leaders. Hence, they have a very accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors have worked with leaders to tackle the most important priorities first, for example providing challenge to secure further improvement in the school's work in Year 10 and Year 11. They are now focusing on ensuring that the actions taken to improve key stage 3 will make their full mark in the new school year.

External support

Leaders value highly the local authority's work to secure a high-quality temporary governing body that includes a number of local authority professionals. The challenge and support governors provide is contributing effectively to the pace of improvement. The school continues to receive challenge and support from a local authority school improvement partner who has carried out a robust review of key stage 3. This has provided the impetus for change and improvement that is currently being embedded across the lower school. It is too early to see the full impact of this work. However, the school improvement partner's reports to leaders and governors lack precision. They focus too much on what is happening and not on what difference actions taken by leaders are making. Sections called 'actions and impact' often lack evidence of impact and sometimes refer to things that are not yet in place. Reports do not focus well enough on the key areas for improvement identified at the time of the last inspection. For example, a recent report indicates that attendance rates are improving but does not report the continuing gaps between rates for disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. This means governors are not as well informed as they need to be from external reviews of the school's effectiveness.