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Mr Andrew Lund
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Dear Mr Lund

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Appleby Grammar School

Following my visit to your academy on 4 April 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in May 2016, the academy was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good academy.

The academy should take further action to:

- eradicate the remaining inconsistencies in the academy by:
 - improving the quality of written and verbal feedback given to pupils so that all pupils, especially the least able, know how to improve their handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar
 - making sure that subject leaders' monitoring activities are carried out to the same high standard that is seen in some subjects
- make certain that governors are given concise information on pupils' achievements, and consistently good-quality summaries of subject leaders' monitoring activities, to enable them to hold leaders to account.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and other senior leaders, representatives from the governing body and the academy's school improvement partner to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Senior leaders joined me in short visits to lessons to look at the impact of the academy's work to develop a consistent approach to improving pupils' spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting and the consistency in applying the academy's new marking and assessment policy. I met with three middle leaders to find out how monitoring had improved in their areas. The academy action plan was evaluated together with other documentation, including information on pupils' achievements and attendance.

Context

There have been no significant changes to the academy since the section 5 inspection. Your curriculum leader for English is currently seconded to the senior leadership team (SLT), providing further capacity and strengthening leadership at this level.

Main findings

Following the inspection in May 2016, you wasted no time in implementing a new and updated academy action plan to tackle the areas for improvement. This plan has clearly defined actions, sharply focused success criteria and states clearly the staff who are responsible for implementing key actions and monitoring them to make sure that actions are having the desired outcome. Governors are in a strong position to evaluate this work because it is reviewed each half term against 'milestones' by a dedicated sub-group of governors responsible for holding leaders to account for the success of this work. As a result, governors know if the academy is on track to become a good school at the next inspection.

A key concern at the last inspection was the accuracy of teachers' assessments at key stage 3, because pupils' work in books was sometimes of a much lower standard than that reported by teachers. You, and other leaders, are now confident that teachers' assessments are accurate because external moderation takes place across all subjects through other schools in the South Lakes Federation (SLF). This moderation work effectively supports teachers' professional development through deepening their understanding of your new assessment system using new GCSE grades to monitor pupils' progress rather than levels. Teachers use this information well to identify pupils who are at risk of underachievement and tailor additional support to help individual pupils. Using this accurate information, you are now in a stronger position to check on the amount of progress that individual pupils and groups make, compared with the targets they have been set by their teachers.

You have further refined judgements on the quality of teaching to provide an

accurate view on the effectiveness of teaching over time. The quality and accuracy of this information has been greatly enhanced by the accurate teachers' assessments now available. Subject leaders have a more accurate view of the impact of teaching on learning in their subject area because a wide range of evidence is used to make these judgements, including from checks of pupils' work in books, from short visits to lessons and from formal observations of teaching and learning. Senior leaders carry out further checks on the accuracy of these judgements through joint monitoring activities with subject leaders. However, in summarising the findings from monitoring work, there is no standard format for subject leaders to use. Some reports to senior leaders and governors are of a much better quality than others. A new approach to reporting this information is being trialled in some subjects and year groups but, in the interim, inconsistencies exist where monitoring activities lack rigour and weaknesses in teaching are not being tackled quickly enough.

You introduced a new whole-school marking policy to make sure that literacy errors are quickly identified and pupils are given support to help them to improve their handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Some teachers have devised their own methods to help pupils to learn spelling rules, whereas other teachers ask pupils to correct their errors by writing each out three times. In some lessons, the feedback given by teachers does not help pupils well enough to improve their handwriting or to use correct punctuation or grammar, especially feedback given to the least able. Leaders are aware of these inconsistencies. Although some training has already been given to staff, further support is needed to make sure that all teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to help all pupils to improve their literacy skills. English teachers visited some feeder primary schools to find out for themselves about the higher expectations and developments in key stage 2 English teaching and learning. More could be done to form even stronger links with primary schools so that teachers in the academy learn from primary colleagues how to help pupils to overcome their literacy difficulties. Nevertheless, improvements are being made and pupils confidently explained how 'spelling mats' help them to spell correctly key words, and use correct subject terminology technical language.

Year 7 catch-up funding is spent well to fill gaps in learning in literacy and numeracy for pupils entitled to receive this additional support. Additional groups and resources are organised in English and mathematics for Year 7 and Year 8 so that the least able pupils receive extra help in smaller groups. Peer mentors from Year 11 and Year 12 regularly help weak readers during form time. As yet, information available in school is not used well enough to identify if this spending is accelerating pupils' progress so that they quickly catch up with their classmates. Further plans are being developed to measure improvements to reading ages and numeracy skills for pupils entitled to this funding.

Governors are provided with detailed information on pupils' achievements in all subjects across key stage 3. However, some of this information is overly complex

and does not enable governors to easily identify if gaps are diminishing for disadvantaged pupils and for those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in Years 7, 8 and 9. Governors do not know enough about which teachers and subjects are less successful in removing barriers to learning or where there are strengths to share across the academy.

Improvements in mathematics have been tackled successfully, such as introducing a focus on problem-solving and developing reasoning across the school, including in the sixth form. Further support is now provided for non-specialists and there are now more opportunities for teachers in mathematics to share effective practice.

Tackling weaknesses in attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, continues to be a focus. Families of these pupils are supported in accessing early help and this is making a difference for most pupils at risk of low attendance. Rigorous monitoring of attendance and behaviour for individual pupils and groups enables leaders to successfully target support to particular families where this is needed.

External support

A wide range of external support has been sought through schools within the SLF and the Queen Elizabeth Kirkby Lonsdale teaching school alliance. This external support is effective. A national leader of education has successfully supported leaders in further developing senior leadership capacity in the academy, resulting in the secondment of the curriculum leader of English to the SLT. A specialist leader of education from John Ruskin School has provided support to help leaders to raise the attainment of boys, particularly in English, leading to a narrowing of the gender gap for pupils in key stage 4. Improving primary transition continues to be a focus, supported by work with a former primary headteacher from the Eden Rural Schools Alliance. All necessary support is therefore in place.

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

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector