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Dr Judith Greene
Executive headteacher
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Dear Dr Greene

Special measures monitoring inspection of Haltwhistle Community Campus Upper School

Following my visit with Deano Wright, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 28–29 March 2017, 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 fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in May 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.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the executive director, wellbeing and community health service for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2015.

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so progress is at least good in all subjects for all pupils by ensuring that:
 - accurate assessment is used by teachers to plan and to teach lessons at the right level for different groups of pupils
 - teachers mark pupils' work more frequently and more accurately so pupils are aware of the next steps they need to take to improve
 - there is a stronger and more consistent focus on encouraging pupils' enjoyment of writing and mathematics.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by ensuring that:
 - school development plans are based on a thorough and accurate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
 - clear timescales and deadlines for improvement, together with well-defined targets by which to measure success, are set so that the pace of school improvement increases
 - inconsistencies in the quality of leadership and teaching are tackled through more rigorous performance management and stronger accountability of staff
 - middle leaders are fully involved in evaluating pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility, so that they are held accountable for tackling any identified weaknesses
 - the curriculum meets the needs and interests of all pupils so that all are well prepared for their future studies
 - funding provided through the pupil premium is used effectively in raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including the most able
 - governors understand and use a range of evidence about the school's performance to enable them to provide an appropriate level of challenge to senior leaders and hold them to account
 - parents have access through the school's website to all the information the school is required to make available.

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 fifth monitoring inspection on 28 to 29 March 2017

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the executive headteacher and head of upper school (senior leaders); leaders responsible for mathematics and special educational needs and disabilities; the parent and family support worker; two members of the governing board; and a group of staff. The lead inspector also held a telephone conversation with a teacher providing external support to staff and the new head of English (designate). Inspectors visited 17 lessons to observe learning; speak to pupils informally about their experiences of school; and scrutinise the current level of work in pupils' books. Two of these visits were conducted jointly with the head of upper school. Inspectors also scrutinised over 50 English books, with a particular focus on the quality of pupils' writing. A wide range of documentation, including improvement planning and the school's own analysis of pupils' current attainment, progress and attendance was evaluated.

Context

The executive headteacher, employed by the incoming sponsor (Bright Tribe Trust) and paid for by the governing board of the school, and the head of upper school, continue to support the transition to the new sponsor and ensure leadership stability. While the re-sponsoring process has taken longer than anticipated, this will now be completed by May 2017. Both senior leaders will continue in their post once the re-sponsoring process has been completed. One long-term supply teacher left the school in February 2017. This position has been filled by a short-term supply teacher until a new head of English takes up their post from the beginning of the summer term. One other long-term supply teacher has been given a fixed-term contract for one year. The technology teacher, appointed to work across the campus at the start of the autumn term 2016, will no longer work in the upper school from the summer term 2017.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders continue to forge ahead with their plans for school improvement. Both the executive headteacher and the head of school hold a clear vision for the future of Haltwhistle. They are rightly ambitious for what pupils, staff and the local community can achieve together. While the journey to re-sponsor with another trust has taken much longer than anticipated, the interim leadership arrangements are serving the school well. Although some significant weaknesses remain, particularly in English, the school's journey out of special measures is accelerating because leadership and staffing have stabilised and a clear and consistent message about what needs to be done is being heard by all staff.

A lot has already been achieved in the last two terms. The fundamental systems and processes for running the school and improving its quality are firmly in place. Senior leaders are acutely aware that these new ways of working need to fully embed into day-to-day practice so that teaching becomes more consistent and pupils' outcomes improve at an even quicker rate. The long tail of underachievement that has hampered pupils' life chances over recent years is beginning to be eradicated.

Recent decisions around staffing, including the imminent appointment of a head of English, and a significant investment in the professional development of staff, are beginning to reap rewards. Staff see the opportunities being afforded to them, as professionals, which have been lacking in the past. Most are keen, interested and enthusiastic about putting their own learning to good use within the classroom and developing their craft. Learning support assistants (LSAs) particularly appreciate the opportunity to train and learn alongside their teacher colleagues so that all adults within a classroom understand the teaching strategies being used.

The head of school has continued to provide one-to-one coaching for staff. This has allowed teachers to look with fresh eyes on their own practice and develop their skills of personal reflection. Opportunities to accompany the head of school on short visits to classrooms across the school have allowed each teacher to refine their own understanding of teaching. Staff are becoming increasingly confident at spotting the features of teaching that have had the greatest impact on pupils' learning overall; more limited analysis is made of the impact of these teaching approaches on different groups of pupils, such as disadvantaged pupils or the most able.

Middle leaders are beginning to step up to the plate. The head of mathematics and the special educational needs coordinator, in particular, are contributing more effectively to developments within their own areas and have clear plans for how they see their aspects of the school's work progressing. This has included opportunities to observe and feed back on the work of others in their team to support continuous improvement. The leadership of English has travelled a much rockier road. Oversight of this subject has been continuously poor and beset with recruitment difficulties. As a result, this subject has remained weak throughout the special measures monitoring process. While senior leaders are confident that they have at last secured a high-calibre candidate, they are yet to start in post and much remains to be done in an ever-decreasing period of time.

The rapid improvement plan has become a useful tool for managing the raft of changes that need to be made for the school to provide an acceptable standard of education. Senior leaders have identified the correct priorities and actions, including the timescales in which work will be completed. They have been less effective at highlighting the anticipated difference this work will have on pupils' learning and progress. Targets can often be woolly. Simply stating that areas of the school's work will 'improve' or 'get better' prevents a clearer picture of the school's progress. Governors would particularly appreciate more measurable targets so they can

challenge more robustly if leaders fall short of what is expected. In part, this is because the school's assessment system needs refinement. Analysis does not routinely provide information about all pupil groups, across year groups and subjects. Staff therefore lack some insight into where their teaching should be targeted next for maximum impact.

Governance continues to strengthen. Despite ongoing uncertainty about which governors will transfer to the new governing board once the re-sponsoring process has finished, members have remained committed to supporting the school on its improvement journey. A greater appreciation of assessment information and a more informed view of the day-to-day work of the school is allowing governors to question leaders with greater rigour and challenge. Some governors are particularly adept at unpicking the difference the school is making to the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils. The same lens has not been applied to other pupil groups, such as the most able pupils, because the quality of information and analysis they receive is not of the same calibre for all year groups and subjects.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is improving quickly in most subjects and year groups from a very low baseline. With the exception of English teaching, staff have grasped the new ideas and strategies to improve pupils' outcomes. While these new ways of working still need further time to embed before they become habit and routine, teaching is gradually becoming more consistent. Senior leaders agree that those members of staff who show they are already confident with new approaches need support and encouragement to reflect on how they are working so that they can begin to adapt and refine them.

Where teaching is strongest over time, most typically in mathematics, it is focused on learning rather than tasks or activities. Teachers design lessons that will move pupils on in their thinking, at pace, rather than being overly focused on what pupils will do. In these instances, teachers have a solid grasp of their subject; they understand the small steps that pupils need to take in order to fully understand concepts and ideas. Some teachers use questioning well to judge how much pupils have learned. This allows staff to intervene and provide appropriate support or greater challenge, where pupils show errors and misconceptions in their thinking or have quickly grasped a concept and need to be stretched further.

LSAs have continued to refine their approaches so that their own practice has also improved. A greater number are now prompting pupils to answer for themselves or with a fuller response rather than simply providing answers. They are encouraging pupils to think and understand rather than focusing purely on completing work. This is allowing supported pupils to develop their resilience and independence so that they do not become overly reliant on adult help.

Where teaching has remained weak over time, staff remain too heavily focused on how they will keep pupils occupied rather than on what is needed to help them to progress. The most able pupils, in particular, remain insufficiently challenged because, for some teachers, their concept of learning is stuck on the idea that 'everyone must do the same, all of the time'. This leads to slower progress over time as pupils do not receive the tailored teaching that they need. Some staff do not identify misconceptions quickly enough during lessons or in pupils' work to allow them to adapt their approach and see greater success. This is because some teachers lack sufficient awareness of the learning taking place within their classroom. Opportunities for intervention and challenge are therefore missed and pupils' learning stalls.

Teaching in English has been exceptionally weak over time. It is only now, after nearly two years in special measures, that it is starting to improve. Senior leaders and staff realise that there is an enormous mountain to climb. Assessment information is not being used rigorously in this subject to identify pupils' gaps in knowledge or skills. Teaching is haphazard. It jumps from topic to topic before pupils have had time to fully grasp all they need to know and practise what they have been taught. Expectations remain too low. Various teachers, over the course of the school's special measures journey, have not insisted on a better quality or quantity of work. Importantly, senior leaders have secured a new head of English from the summer term 2017 who understands the scale of the task facing them and the school. While they clearly understand where their energies need to be focused first, for some, especially those pupils in Year 6, it may be too little, too late to make up for the lost ground of the past.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' social behaviours remain strong. They are polite, caring and respectful of adults and peers. Learning behaviours are not as well developed due to a history of weak teaching that has not routinely addressed pupils' needs, abilities or interests. A greater proportion of pupils now approach their studies diligently, work hard and are eager to learn, even when they find a particular subject more taxing than others. While pockets of disengagement remain, often characterised by pupils sitting back and letting others contribute during whole-class or group-based tasks, pupils' strong personal behaviours ensure that this does not escalate into poor or disruptive activity. Overall, there is greater willingness among pupils to answer questions during lessons, even when pupils know they might not be wholly correct in their thinking. As teachers' skills of questioning have developed, so too have pupils' learning habits.

Attendance is much improved. Senior leaders and the parent and family support worker have conducted a thorough analysis of the information they hold. This has revealed the different pupil groups that need support. Together, the head of school and the parent and family support worker have targeted those pupils and families at early risk of persistent absence – those falling below 95%. Prompt pursuit of

absence, including knocking on doors to bring pupils into school and honest discussions with parents, has contributed to a significantly reduced rate of persistent absence. Attendance has a high profile around the school and is regularly addressed through assemblies so that it remains at the forefront of pupils' minds. Pupils are rising to the head of school's challenge to attend every single day. Since the start of the spring term, an increasing proportion of pupils now have 100% attendance each week.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes are improving overall, across all subjects and in most year groups. Mathematics shows the greatest improvement over time, in part due to stronger leadership and teaching in this subject. School assessment information shows that pupils are achieving more highly than before and that the significant weaknesses of the past are being systematically addressed. Pupils are catching up and keeping up in this subject. Conversely, weaker teaching and ineffective leadership of English over time, while recognised by senior leaders, is yet to be fully addressed. Standards and progress in Year 6, especially in pupils' writing, remain weak.

Inspectors, alongside senior leaders, found pupils' writing to be improving across the school, with the exception of Year 6. In this year group, standards remain far from what is expected for pupils of this age. Some pupils, including those who achieved the expected standard for their age in the lower school, demonstrate writing skills more commonly found in infant classes. Senior leaders agreed with inspectors that pupils' writing in English is typically a series of simple sentences with immature spelling, a lack of sustained ideas and expression and poor-quality presentation. Year 6 pupils are certainly capable of achieving more than this. Pupils have become used to the lower expectations set within this subject. Consistently weak teaching has led to a lack of appropriate opportunities for pupils to show what they are truly able to achieve.

Staff in subjects other than English are working hard to reinforce pupils' literacy skills, including opportunities to tackle new vocabulary or write for more extended periods of time. While this is giving useful additional time for pupils to apply their developing skills in other contexts and for real purposes, teachers have reached a limit in what they can reinforce and develop without their own subject becoming another English lesson. The long-held deficit in pupils' English skills is holding back an even faster rate of progress overall.

The most able pupils are beginning to receive a more challenging diet of lessons and activities, but not all teachers fully appreciate how far some pupils still need to be pushed in order for them to reach their full potential. Changing a culture of expectations that has been engrained over many years will take time. Senior leaders and a growing number of staff are clear – pupils can achieve highly at this school, given a stronger quality of teaching.

External support

The head of school has continued to look outside of the school for additional support. A successful head of department from a neighbouring local authority has been commissioned to support those staff who are teaching humanities subjects as non-specialists. A round of observations, coaching and shared teaching of a class has already been undertaken. Staff say they feel more confident teaching outside of their specialism now and have welcomed seeing the advice and guidance being demonstrated in school, with their own class. They now appreciate that 'it can be done' at Haltwhistle.

The incoming head of English has already undertaken visits to outstanding primary schools, before taking up this post, to investigate and learn from the best about effective strategies for developing writing in key stage 2. They recognise that this will be crucial in driving a faster pace of improvement, especially in Year 6.