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Ms J Nolan
Executive Principal
Thomas Hepburn Community Academy
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Dear Ms Nolan

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Thomas Hepburn Community Academy

Following my visit to your school on 3 May 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders, the vice-chair of the governing body and one other governor and a representative of the Northern Education Trust. I also held discussions with a group of pupils and looked at the school's security checks on members of staff. I also evaluated the trust's statement of action and the school's improvement plan.

Context

Since the school was last inspected in November 2016, you have made permanent appointments of new senior leaders including a senior vice-principal (currently the acting head of academy) and two vice-principals. In addition, you have appointed a new director of inclusion who took up post at Easter. The former vice-principals,

some middle leaders and a number of teachers have left the school and several new appointments have been made, including a new subject leader and second in department for mathematics. An interim executive board continues to provide governance and will do so for the foreseeable future.

The quality of leadership and management at the academy

Your energy and experience are crucial to the school's recovery. Under your skilful and determined leadership, the school has continued to push through a programme of structural changes which began shortly after your appointment in September 2016. The review you led immediately after being appointed highlighted deep shortcomings in the school's performance. Consequently, you and members of the interim executive board of governors were not surprised by the inspection findings in November. You have well-prepared plans in place to address the school's shortcomings and tackle the areas for improvement identified in the November 2016 inspection. You and the interim executive board are systematically monitoring the impact of these plans. All key stakeholders, including representatives of the Northern Education Trust, know that considerable challenges remain and the pace of improvement must be sustained to secure better outcomes for pupils.

Your new permanent senior leadership team is now in place and all members of the team are clear about their role and responsibilities. You continue to second additional leadership capacity from other trust schools in order to complete a number of structural changes and support the training and development of school staff. The leadership team is now well placed to begin a phase of development work to improve the curriculum, strengthen the quality of teaching and secure better attendance.

You have already improved the standard of behaviour markedly. Pupils are clear the school is now calm and more purposeful as a result of the consistent implementation of the new behaviour policy and tougher use of sanctions. Pupils now consistently wear the school uniform and punctuality is improving. However, levels of attendance remain well below the national average for secondary schools and far too many pupils miss school regularly. You have put in place effective systems to analyse patterns of attendance and have begun to target particular groups through the use of rewards or by challenging families that do not engage through the use of fines. As a result, overall attendance for this year to date shows improvement, although the attendance of disadvantaged pupils remains well below that of other pupils.

You and your leadership team took the decision to implement a revised curriculum model and new timetable from the start of January. The new curriculum model provides a broader and more balanced range of subjects in key stage 3, with more time allocated to English and mathematics. The model has also introduced 30 minutes of teaching each day for pupils' personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) development and the promotion of fundamental British values. Your team is

developing appropriate schemes of work to meet pupils' personal development and welfare needs. However, a programme of careers guidance is yet to be implemented. You plan more adjustments to the curriculum in September 2017 to further strengthen access for pupils to the teaching of PSHE education. There are early signs that shorter lessons are sharpening the pace of teaching and improving pupils' concentration.

At the time of the inspection in November 2016, you had already commissioned an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium. As a result of this review, the school's spending strategy has been amended and much more detailed planning is now in place. Funding is now more sharply focused on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and providing additional support in English and mathematics. Parts of your strategy also allocate resources to supporting specific pupils improve their behaviour and attendance. You have a further external review scheduled for July 2017 to evaluate the impact of these strategies. In the meantime, governors are checking the impact of the new strategy carefully.

You and your acting head of academy have a detailed picture of the quality of teaching across the school and you are managing the performance of teachers robustly. A number of teachers have chosen to leave the school or continue to be the focus of additional support. You have issued guidance to make your expectations of teachers clear and have ensured that teachers have the necessary information on pupils' prior attainment and targets to inform their lesson planning. A programme of training and development is in place. The checks you and other leaders have made show the proportion of teaching that meets your expectations has risen considerably as a result. However, more than half of all teaching still falls below your threshold. Pupils report lessons are becoming more purposeful because teachers now make clear what should be achieved by the end of the lesson.

Little has been done to improve provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities or speak English as an additional language. However, you are clear what needs to be done and, with the very recent appointment of the new and experienced director of inclusion, are now in a position to take the necessary steps. Consequently, you have just started to review the special educational needs register and review systems to identify those pupils in need of specific additional support.

The school's most recent assessment information indicates overall attainment and progress at key stage 4 is on track to make only modest improvements in 2017. Outcomes may continue to be below the government's floor standard for attainment and progress at key stage 4. Assessment information for other year groups also shows far too many pupils are working below the more challenging targets you have set for them. You and members of the interim executive board are realistic about the challenges you face but are adamant the progress made to date together with the next development phase of work will begin to address the legacy of past underachievement.

The interim executive board is providing rigorous scrutiny and holding you and other leaders tightly to account. Board members make regular visits to check on progress and systematically review the impact of actions in the improvement plan each month.

The Northern Education Trust continues to provide considerable financial support and resource to support the school's work and has secure arrangements in place to monitor and evaluate the school's progress. The school remains a high priority for the trust. The achievement partner appointed by the trust is providing effective challenge and support.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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 Gateshead. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith

Her Majesty's Inspector