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Mr Warren Turner
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Turner

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Whitehaven Academy

Following my visit to your school on 23–24 May 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in October 2016.

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 trust's statement of action is fit for purpose
- the school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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 chief operating officer of Bright Tribe Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cumbria. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Vincent Ashworth
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in October 2016.

- Raise achievement and improve pupils' progress, by:
 - taking urgent steps to improve the quality of teaching
 - ensuring that teachers in all subjects, and especially in mathematics and in the sixth form, give pupils work which challenges them sufficiently
 - ensuring that teachers raise their expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - ensuring that teachers identify where pupils have literacy and numeracy difficulties and help pupils to overcome them
 - ensuring that disadvantaged pupils are fully supported, so that they make progress which is similar to that of their peers
 - ensuring that teachers use agreed behaviour systems consistently to manage any poor behaviour in their lessons
 - urgently devising and implementing reliable tracking systems, so that all teachers, departments and leaders can accurately assess the progress that pupils are making.
- Improve the quality of education in the sixth form, by:
 - ensuring that the 16 to 19 study programmes meet statutory requirements
 - improving the learning experience for students in the sixth form, so that they make better progress from their starting points and more students stay on to follow Year 13 courses.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by taking the following actions:
 - academy leaders and the sponsor should ensure that teachers and leaders have opportunities to develop their skills through working with colleagues in schools beyond the academy
 - leaders should review the curriculum to ensure that pupils receive their entitlement to the teaching of religious education, careers, British values and personal, social, health and economic education
 - the sponsor should take action to ensure that governance is effective and holds the academy rigorously to account
 - take steps to communicate governance arrangements to members of the academy's community, so that parents and staff fully understand them
 - the sponsor should take steps to improve the academy's learning environment.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken

in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 23 May 2017 to 24 May 2017

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the senior leadership team and middle leaders to discuss the progress and impact of actions taken to improve behaviour, improve the quality of teaching and learning and raise standards. The inspector also met with the head of sixth form, middle leaders and teachers to gauge their views on the impact of leadership and management. In addition to observing teaching and learning on a learning walk, the inspector also scrutinised samples of pupils' work jointly with senior leaders. He also met with groups of pupils from across all year groups to discuss their experience of learning and behaviour.

The inspector met with the chief operating officer and director of secondary education from Bright Tribe Trust as well as the independent chair of the trust's Accountability, Review and Challenge (ARC) Group to consider the extent of support and challenge provided by the trust, as well as the trust's arrangements for governance. The inspector received correspondence from a small number of parents and their views were also taken into consideration.

Context

Since the last inspection, two members of the senior leadership team have left. The school has appointed three assistant headteachers on three-year fixed-term contracts from the existing staff body to lead on improvements in the quality of teaching. In addition, a behaviour and attendance lead has also been appointed from within the existing staff body. The capacity of the senior team has been extended by the establishment of an extended leadership team, which comprises a director of numeracy and a director of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and careers. The current head of sixth form has joined the extended leadership team. For September 2017, the school has also appointed a substantive deputy headteacher to lead on improvements in mathematics and the effectiveness of the use of pupil premium funding.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since the last inspection the school has been through significant turmoil and unrest, but is now entering a more positive phase. This is due to the headteacher's resolute leadership and his determination to heal the rifts, the strong moral purpose of staff and the increasing commitment from some parents to support the school. Staff morale has improved because teachers and leaders have faith in their headteacher; they have subscribed to his vision for the school and are working with a common purpose to raise standards. Teachers say that they are optimistic and are keen to move on from what has been a bleak period. They are particularly eager for the trust to provide opportunities for them to engage more widely with its family of

academies and share best practice.

Negotiations between Bright Tribe Trust and the trade union side concluded positively on 24 March 2017, following an agreement for the implementation of a school-wide performance management system. Throughout this period the headteacher has kept his focus on improvement; support from the trust has enabled him to focus strongly on his improvement plan and maintain the momentum for change.

Issues relating to the poor standard of accommodation have often threatened to derail the trajectory of improvement. The trust has implemented a planned schedule of remedial work which makes some of the accommodation more tolerable. There has been a greater investment in site improvements this academic year. Senior leaders of the trust are acutely aware that many aspects of the accommodation are not fit for purpose. They have lobbied at the highest levels to seek support in providing a more definitive solution.

The time is now ripe for the school to move on at an accelerated pace and on a stronger footing. The headteacher has identified a new leadership team which will be fully operational from September 2017. The trust continues to provide coaching and support for the headteacher but a full programme of development and training will be required for individuals new to their senior role.

Although some parents remain disillusioned about the trust's involvement, there has been a groundswell of positivity amongst some parents. These parents are now backing the school and supporting the headteacher's vision in turning Whitehaven Academy into a school of choice, which serves its community with pride. Attendance at the headteacher's regular briefings for parents is very high; on some occasions over 200 parents have attended. Teachers and middle leaders describe increasing levels of parental involvement in supporting pupils with their learning, or helping them to attend more regularly.

The curriculum for key stage 3 and key stage 4 has been overhauled to ensure that it is both broad and balanced and meets statutory requirements. From September 2017 pupils in Years 7 to 9 will benefit from an integrated humanities programme that includes religious education. The revised curriculum will also offer citizenship and personal, social, health and economic education. The headteacher has identified specialist teachers to deliver these topics across all year groups. The proposed curriculum model has flexibility to meet the needs and aspirations of pupils of different levels of prior attainment. It also provides pupils with the option of studying three single science GCSEs. Pupils currently in Year 9 have been provided with the appropriate support to make informed decisions about their GCSE options. As a result, the number of pupils seeking to leave to join the local university technical college has reduced considerably compared to last year.

The presence of the head of sixth form on the extended leadership team means

that sixth-form matters have greater prominence in the decision-making process. The sixth form is managed with military precision. The head of sixth form has a clear strategy for raising achievement and a robust operational plan, which he monitors very closely. Leaders and teachers in the sixth form have acted quickly on the findings from the last inspection to ensure that provision complies with the 16 to 19 study programme requirements. Remedial action has been taken to ensure that Year 12 students are provided with work placements by the end of the summer term. Further consideration is being given to how work experience and employer engagement can be enhanced further in the next academic year.

An external review of the use of pupil premium funding was completed in March 2017. It is therefore too soon to determine what difference the review has made. This was a thorough review based on observations of teaching and learning and the careful analysis of data relating to the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The findings and recommendations are insightful and are starting to influence approaches to teaching in English, for example. However, existing policies and the strategy for pupil premium spending should be revised to take full account of the findings and to ensure that the recommendations are systematically cascaded through all subject areas. Senior leaders are under no illusion that there remains much work to be done to improve the life chances of disadvantaged pupils and students at the school.

The first phase of the trust's implementation of the new arrangements for governance has been successful in securing a greater level of accountability and challenge of senior leadership. The independent chair of the ARC Group keeps a close eye on the school's performance against key performance indicators. The three meetings of this group that have taken place so far have all been by conference call and remote from the school. An external review of the trust's governance carried out in February 2017 has recommended that future meetings of this important function of governance are face to face. This will be implemented from September 2017.

The conflict and unrest experienced in the spring term meant that the time was not right for the trust to press ahead with implementing the cornerstone of its governance structure, known as the Drive Team. The trust is now moving at a pace to implement this function, which comprises parent, staff and community representation. It is intended that the Drive Team will provide local support and challenge to both the senior leadership and the trust. Representatives from this function will also contribute to the termly ARC Group. The school has received applications from parents and other stakeholders for membership of the Drive Team. The applications have been sifted and scored; the trust has appointed individuals with the appropriate skills and knowledge of the locality to provide an additional tier of challenge and support. The inaugural meeting of the Drive Team is scheduled for early June 2017. This will be followed by a comprehensive programme of training and development for Drive Team members, provided by the trust.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Senior leaders have implemented a series of checks on pupils' books to review the quality of learning and the extent of progress being made. The information from these checks is used to inform weekly briefing sessions for teaching staff that are devoted to specific aspects of improving teaching and learning.

Senior leaders have been unable to establish a baseline for the quality of teaching because the proposed performance management system was not agreed until late in March 2017. Senior leaders have moved quickly to establish a cycle of formal lesson observation which will be completed for all staff by the end of the summer term. It is too soon to determine the extent of improvement in teaching and learning. Given that senior leaders need to focus on securing rapid improvements in teaching during the autumn term, it is inappropriate at present to divert their attention away by having to support the needs of newly qualified teachers.

A post of director of literacy has been created and the holder is a member of the extended leadership team. He has already taken steps to ensure that pupils' literacy is developed more systematically across all subjects. Reading is now a very high priority; teachers recognise that this is the key to enabling pupils to access the wider curriculum and the tasks they are given in lessons.

The school has become much more outward-facing. Subject leaders have derived enormous benefit from sharing ideas and expertise with colleagues from other schools and academies at regional subject network meetings. Not only has this external involvement renewed their energy and enthusiasm for their subject, it has helped them to calibrate their own marking and assessment against that of other professionals in the region. Links with employers are evolving under the leadership of a new appointee with responsibility for leading on careers, innovation and enterprise. Although the school provides opportunities for taster days for local primary schools, the links to support pupils' academic transition from Year 6 to Year 7 are underdeveloped.

The work undertaken by the school to develop a whole-school assessment strategy is commendable. This work has engaged staff at all levels so that teachers have a sense of ownership of the system. There are clear links between the assessment descriptors that teachers use for assessing pupils' progress and the attainment targets in the national curriculum. This means that pupils now have very clear targets to help them make incremental progress from the outset of Year 7 to their GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11. Following initial trials of the system during the summer term, senior leaders have plans to review and evaluate where adaptations need to be made, prior to full implementation in September 2017.

The school has revised its marking policy and the inspector saw some good examples of teachers using feedback to prompt pupils to reflect more deeply on

their responses. However, this is not consistently the case and more needs to be done to ensure that all teachers use the school's marking policy to challenge all pupils, regardless of their level of prior attainment. For example, in the joint work scrutiny carried out with senior leaders, the inspector identified an example where a teacher's feedback to a most-able pupil was detailed and challenging. The same level of challenge was not afforded to a lower-ability disadvantaged pupil by the same teacher for the same piece of work. Overall, the accuracy of teachers' assessments is increasingly reliable because they are moderated by subject leads and subsequently verified by senior leaders.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The behaviour of pupils has improved significantly since the last inspection. There has been a marked change not only in pupils' commitment to attend regularly but also in their attitude to learning. Pupils arrive looking smart and ready to learn. Students in the sixth form present as young professionals, showing greater maturity in their ability to work independently. Students who are disadvantaged can cite examples of increasing levels of challenge in tasks they are given to do in lessons. Many of them speak enthusiastically of things they have achieved recently that make them feel proud.

A new senior leader has recently taken on the oversight of behaviour and attendance. His focus on securing greater consistency in the application of the behaviour management system, as well as guidance received from a consultant provided by the trust, have secured further improvement in both attendance and behaviour. Fixed-term exclusions in the year to date have declined by well over half, when compared with the same period last year. Behaviour logs show a significant reduction in the number of most-serious infringements of school rules, and therefore a reduction in detentions. Pupils also report that instances of low-level disruption in lessons are less frequent; where they do occur, teachers manage them well. School data indicates that overall attendance continues to rise and is close to the national average. However, there remains a stubborn five percentage point difference between the attendance rate for disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers.

The culture and ethos of the sixth form has improved considerably. Students have adopted a more mature attitude to their studies than was previously the case. They have responded well to a structured timetable that provides a framework for supervised study and independent research. Students are clear about what is expected of them and are starting to show signs of the study habits required for higher education. Students say that they feel their progress has improved because of a more-structured approach and the additional resources that have been provided for independent study.

The impact of these changes on raising achievement across Year 12 and Year 13 remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this shift in ethos has impacted positively on

attendance figures in the sixth form. Attendance in Year 12 currently stands at 90%, which compares favourably to 86% for the same period last year. For Year 13, the attendance rate stands at 93%, which is also higher compared to 87% for the same period last year.

Outcomes for pupils

Senior leaders are taking a more robust approach to tracking and monitoring pupils' progress. The headteacher instigated mock examinations for Year 11 pupils in November 2016. This enabled him to gain a full picture of the extent of pupils' subject knowledge and understanding and where there were gaps. The findings from these mock examinations enabled the school to compile an intensive programme of remedial interventions aimed at filling specific gaps in knowledge and understanding.

Pupils in Year 11 have responded well, and attendance is strong at additional sessions. This is helped by the fact that free transport is put on for those who attend after school. The school's predictions for GCSE examination results in 2017 suggest only marginal improvement. This is testimony to the long legacy of underachievement for this cohort.

School data for other year groups is more promising. It suggests that pupils in Year 10 are already achieving at the level of their counterparts in Year 11. The school therefore is anticipating an improved harvest of GCSE results in 2018. Similarly, school data also indicates that initiatives to accelerate the progress made by disadvantaged pupils are having a degree of success in the younger year groups.

Retention rates in the sixth form remain relatively low. A review of the curriculum offer for next year, improved information and guidance offered to Year 11 pupils and more stringent entry requirements mean that pupils can make more informed choices about their post-16 studies.

In terms of students moving on to higher education, employment or training, those who applied to university say that they have been well supported and all have received offers. Others feel that they needed more expert guidance on the vocational options available, such as apprenticeships or careers in the armed forces.

External support

The trust's statement of action and the school improvement plan are fit for purpose. The school improvement plan is monitored very closely by representatives of the trust as well as the ARC Group, which evaluates progress made and reports to the trust's board. Now that the Drive Team has been formed, it is essential that this group also assumes a role in checking that intended actions are taking place. The school improvement plan is incisive and contains accurate self-assessment of progress to date.

The focus of support provided by the trust has been on coaching and supporting the headteacher and other senior leaders to enable them to concentrate on raising standards. This support has also been supplemented using other consultants to undertake activities such as reviewing the behaviour management system and reviewing the school's use of data. The trust is now starting to explore how it can make better use of other academies within the trust to enable teachers to develop their subject expertise and share best practice in teaching and learning. During the inspection, teachers and subject leaders said that they welcome increased contact with those in other schools.