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Mr J Richardson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Richardson

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Walney School

Following my visit to your school on 11 October 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, meetings were held with you and other senior leaders, members of the local governing body, representatives from The Queen Katherine School Multi Academy Trust and middle leaders. I also met with pupils from Year 11 and spoke to the chair of both the governing body and the rapid improvement committee on the telephone. I evaluated the trust's statement of action and the school's development plan. I considered a range of school documentation, which included reviews carried out by external consultants. I carried out a learning walk with two senior leaders and visited a range of lessons in mathematics, English, humanities, science and modern foreign languages. I also looked at the school's pre-employment checks on new members of staff.

Context

Since the school was last inspected, four staff have left the school and you have made five new appointments, which include two heads of department and a deputy headteacher with oversight of the curriculum and outcomes for pupils.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You have successfully communicated your vision and ambition for Walney School to the whole school community. In particular, you have won the confidence and backing of teachers who feel they have greater clarity as to what is expected of them. Your strategic leadership of the school is underpinned by a talented group of senior leaders whose skills and expertise are closely matched to the school's priorities for improvement.

The senior leadership team's capacity to maintain the momentum of improvement remains robust. This is evidenced by the focus on improvement that begins in the school's improvement plan and is brought to life through the range of activities across the school that target improvements in teaching and learning. Leadership is distributed throughout the school and all staff know how they can contribute to improving outcomes for pupils. Your self-evaluation rightly celebrates emerging strengths in your school, but more importantly pinpoints exactly where further improvements still need to be made.

Middle leaders have responded well to increased levels of accountability. They are sharply focused on raising achievement and are becoming more proactive in their leadership of teaching. Although you know that there remains some variability in the quality of teaching, no teaching is inadequate.

Visits to lessons during the monitoring inspection indicated that teachers are acutely aware of the minimum expectations that you have set for pupils' learning in all lessons. Teachers systematically translate these expectations into their planning. The additional time allocated on Tuesday afternoons for staff to meet in subject groups has had a significant impact on improving teaching and learning. Not only do teachers share good practice, they also use this time to engage in blue-sky thinking about ways in which they can accelerate pupils' progress.

Behaviour logs indicate that instances of poor behaviour have reduced, as have fixed-term exclusions. Older pupils speak with pride about the contribution they make to school life and how they see themselves as positive role models for younger pupils. This is something they feel was not the case when they started school. Initiatives, such as the pupil mentor scheme, have enabled Year 11 pupils to engage with the school's improvement journey. Pupils in Year 11 involved in the scheme have grown in stature and confidence by coaching younger pupils in reading and mathematics and helping them to progress. All of the Year 11 cohort in 2017 progressed to employment, education or training.

The significant increase in GCSE pass rates for single science subjects in 2017 is testimony to the improvements taking place in that subject. Provisional results in other subjects such as geography, French, ICT, health and social care and sport all show a large increase in pass rates at grades A* to C. Nevertheless, provisional results for 2017 remain very weak overall, indicating the extent of the legacy of

underachievement that persists. Senior leaders are acutely aware that more needs to be done to raise the achievement of the most able pupils as well as to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

You identified a number of barriers to learning within the key stage 4 curriculum and have made structural changes as a result. For example, pupils in Year 10 now select from a range of options more closely suited to their needs and interests. In addition you have allocated more time to teaching non-core subjects in key stage 4. More importantly, senior leaders are conducting a root and branch review of the curriculum to ensure that it builds more effectively on what pupils learned in primary school and matches their needs more closely through key stages 3 and 4.

The school has become more outward-facing. Arrangements for collaboration and sharing good practice with feeder primary schools are excellent. This means that teachers have developed a better understanding of their pupils' individual needs, talents and aspirations from the outset of Year 7. As a result, strategies to raise the reading age of those struggling with their literacy skills have been particularly successful. The development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills has a high profile across the school. Teachers in subjects other than mathematics and English plan their lessons so that pupils have the opportunity to extend their writing, develop their speaking and apply their number skills where appropriate. In science for example, key words are targeted in lessons and teachers use questioning skilfully to provide pupils with opportunities to incorporate the new words into their explanations.

Since the last inspection the special education needs coordinator (SENCo) has engaged in a wide range of training and development activities, including undertaking the mandatory qualification for SENCos. Leadership of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is considerably stronger.

A review of pupil premium spending was carried out in June 2017. Recommendations from this review were acted upon rapidly. Although the review considered aspects of the school's provision that present barriers to pupils' learning, it did not consider external barriers to learning. The school's pupil premium strategy therefore remains weak. More work needs to be carried out as a priority if this strategy is to make any significant difference to the life chances of disadvantaged pupils in your school. The gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and their peers remains stubbornly wide. Similarly, the higher rate of absence for disadvantaged pupils compared to other groups remains a concern.

The trust has provided effective support to the school. Both in the run-up to and since the last inspection, there have been significant changes in staffing. The trust's oversight of administrative processes involved in the departure and appointment of staff has meant that you have been able to maintain your focus on improving teaching and learning. The trust has also been responsive in brokering high-quality external support, mainly through specialist leaders of education (SLEs). Teachers

are very clear about the positive impact that the support from SLEs has had on their own professional development.

The trust has established a rapid improvement committee, which comprises the chief executive officer of the trust, members of the local governing body and a representative from Cumbria local authority. This group works closely with the school's senior leaders and reports on progress to both the local governing body and the trust executive. In addition, external consultants have been used to report on the school's progress in relation to its improvement plan. Feedback from the external reviews has been used appropriately by governors and the trust to support their decision-making. As a consequence of improvements in assessment and the extensive moderation of teachers' marking, governors and the trust have complete confidence in the data that they receive from senior leaders on current pupils' progress. They are satisfied that all groups of pupils currently in Year 11 are making better progress than their peers who sat GCSE examinations in 2017.

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 governing body, the chair of the trust board, 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