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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



2 July 2018

Mr David Stone
Whitworth Park School and Sixth Form College
Whitworth Lane
Spennymoor
County Durham
DL16 7LN

Dear Mr Stone

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Whitworth Park School and Sixth Form College

Following my visit to your school on 19 June 2018, 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 December 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 staff. I met the chief executive officer of the trust which has been brokered by the Department for Education to sponsor the school. I met with a group of governors, including the chair of governors. I met with a representative of the local authority. I also met a group of subject leaders, and a group of pupils from different year groups.

I visited classrooms to observe teaching, accompanied by you and another senior leader. I scrutinised pupils' work, both in lessons and separately. I scrutinised documents, including minutes of meetings with governors and information relating to attendance and behaviour, and child protection. I also examined documents relating to the school's use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils; its curriculum; records to do with the monitoring and development of the quality of teaching; and information about how leaders track pupils' progress. I took into consideration the 155 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View.

The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plans were evaluated.

Context

Shortly after the previous inspection, the headteacher left the school. You were appointed to the post of interim headteacher in January 2017. Together with governors, you have restructured the senior leadership team and have clarified roles and responsibilities within it. You have made new appointments to both the senior team and the subject leaders' team. The local authority and the Department for Education have brokered an academy order so that, as of 1 September 2018, it is expected that the school will be sponsored by the Advance Learning Partnership trust.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You and other leaders have taken decisive action to begin addressing the fundamental weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Principally, you have taken steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning. As a result of this, there are signs of improvement in the engagement of boys and pupils' progress overall.

To achieve this improvement, you have introduced a new system for tracking how well pupils are doing. You have taken action to make sure that the assessment information which teachers put into the system is more accurate than previously. The information is more reliable, because you have worked closely with local authority advisers and staff from the Advance Learning Partnership trust to quality assure the information's accuracy.

Staff at all levels are now held far more accountable for how well pupils are doing than was the case at the time of the previous inspection. You have taken action, for example, to improve the quality of subject leadership. You have invested in providing professional development through the local authority and Advance Learning Partnership trust to equip subject leaders better with stronger skills. Specifically, you have developed their understanding of how to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, high-attaining pupils and boys, and of the use of questions in lessons. You have also ensured that subject leaders are able to support and challenge the teachers in their teams on the progress pupils make.

You now make sure that pupils' assessment information is shared with subject leaders and that they share it with their teams. Consequently, all teachers are responsible for planning lessons which meet the needs of the pupils in their classes. This planning and the quality of teaching are monitored carefully. Action is taken when pupils are identified as falling behind.

There is evidence that teachers' planning, based on pupils' assessment information, is leading to pupils' progress improving. The pupils who have been identified as falling behind now feature prominently in teachers' plans. For example, teachers make use of more targeted questioning strategies to engage boys and lower-ability pupils. There is evidence of task-setting which enables the most able pupils to be stretched further. Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are higher than at the time of the previous inspection: all of the pupils spoken to said that teaching is better than it was then, that teachers now set work which is more demanding, based on pupils' starting points, and that, as a result of better teaching, they are clearer about what they need to do to improve further.

You have made sure that the attendance of pupils has been prioritised. The roles of staff associated with attendance have been sharpened; there is a clearer system for monitoring trends of absence and taking action; there are stronger links with families; and attendance has been brought into the school's rewards system. As a result of such firm action, pupils' attendance is now in line with the national average. The rate at which pupils are persistently absent is below the national average. Leaders acknowledge, however, that there is more work to be done, such as further improving the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and disadvantaged pupils.

You and governors have undertaken a review of the use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils, as recommended in the previous inspection report. As a result of this review, you have acted swiftly to improve the way in which this funding is used. The funding is now more clearly accounted for in the school budget, so that governors are able to hold you to account for its use. A recently appointed leader for pupil premium has a firm handle on how the funding is being used. Disadvantaged pupils are beginning to make stronger progress, partly as the result of this more effective use of the funding. You recognise that there is still much to be done, such as the further refining of plans, but positive first steps have been taken.

Governors acted quickly following the previous inspection. Since appointing you, they have supported and challenged you in improving standards in the school. Governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths, but also its weaker areas. They recognise that, previously, they did not know the school well enough and accepted at face value the information they received from leaders. To address this, governors now have a stronger presence in the school and, supported by the local authority and the Advance Learning Partnership trust, have a closer eye on performance information, including on the pupil premium. This means that they are now able to ask more challenging questions about how well pupils are doing, and to have an accurate picture of when they are not doing well, and what is being done about it.

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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw

Her Majesty's Inspector