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Ms Diane Wood
Chief Executive
Cumbria County Council
The Courts
Carlisle
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Michael Cladingbowl HMI
Regional Director, North West

Dear Diane

Cumbria secondary school inspections from 1 November to 20 December 2013

As you know, Ofsted conducted a number of secondary school inspections in Cumbria during November and December 2013 (see Annex 1).

The inspection outcomes raise serious concerns about the quality of secondary education in the Cumbria local authority area.

A high proportion of Cumbria secondary schools either require improvement or are inadequate. Key outcomes for children at the age of 16 have been significantly below the national average in the last two years and the gap has widened. Of particular concern is school performance in coastal and urban areas, and the weak achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In summary, none of the schools inspected improved and eight declined, including five that were placed in special measures. The support provided by the local authority to maintained schools has not prevented a decline in standards.

Of the 14 secondary schools inspected under section 5:

- None were judged to be providing an 'outstanding' standard of education
- Three were judged to be providing a 'good' standard of education (one of these was already at this standard and two declined from an outstanding level)
- Five schools 'require improvement'. In two of these schools, the quality of leadership was good but in the others it requires improvement
- One school has 'serious weaknesses' and had declined from a good standard.
- Five schools, including the pupil referral unit, were placed into 'special measures'.

Of the three schools inspected under section 8, two were making adequate progress, in the other, progress was insufficient.

The sixth form college 'requires improvement' having declined from a previously good standard.

During inspections, inspectors noted pockets of good teaching in almost all of the schools, and signs of improving leadership and better governance in a small number. However, there were also common weaknesses across many of the schools.

- Poor achievement in mathematics and English for specific groups of students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly boys
- Too little challenge in lessons for more-able students
- Marking that gives too few pointers on how students can improve
- Lack of development of literacy and numeracy skills across all subjects
- Weak leadership of teaching and the performance management of teachers
- Ineffective governance: external reviews were recommended in three schools and in others governance required improvement
- Poor self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, which resulted in action plans that lacked ambition.

In the discussion with headteachers, only a minority indicated that the Local Authority knew their school well. However, local authority support for newly qualified teachers, governors, behaviour management and brokering school-to-school support was valued.

Most headteachers were positive about the embryonic development of federations, including the Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL). They were also pleased by the Local Authority's move to inject significant resources into this development.

Headteachers, generally, indicated that local authority support is too reactive and dependent on the outcome of inspections, rather than nipping problems in the bud. They perceived there to be insufficient leadership from the authority but stated that recent changes to strategy have created more optimism within the system. Secondary headteachers said there is a lack of confidence in the ability of some local authority advisors, particularly those who come from a primary background, to provide useful advice to secondary schools.

Conclusion

There are too few good secondary schools in Cumbria and things are not improving. There is little evidence of an effective shared strategy improving the quality of education across the county.

In my view, there is an urgent need for the Local Authority to provide greater challenge and support to its secondary schools and extend partnership working.

Ofsted will keep the outcomes of inspection in Cumbria under review and will continue to work with schools and the Local Authority to ensure a higher proportion of young people are provided with a good standard of education.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve the quality of education for the children and young people of Cumbria.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. Cladingbowl".

Michael Cladingbowl HMI

Regional Director, North West

ANNEX 1

Ofsted inspected 17 secondary schools, one pupil referral unit and one sixth-form college. Fourteen of the inspections were conducted under section 5 of the Education Act 2006, two were special measures monitoring inspections and one was a monitoring visit to a school requiring improvement. Two of the schools inspected under section 5 were converter academies and one was a sponsored academy. The two schools that received special measures monitoring visits were sponsored academies. A sixth form college was also inspected under the learning and skills framework.

During the inspections, inspectors asked additional questions, as relevant, about the support and impact of the local authority arrangements for school improvement. The headteachers of a further 10 secondary schools were interviewed and telephone discussions were held with yourself and representatives of the dioceses. Inspectors also spoke to headteachers organisations, including the Cumbria Alliance of System Leaders (CASL) and the Cumbria Association of Secondary Headteachers (CASH), about system leadership across Cumbria. A representative from the National College for Teaching and Leadership was involved in these discussions. The Local Authority discussion paper 'Leading beyond authority' was scrutinised.