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Mr Richard McManus
Principal
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Dear Mr McManus

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Skipton Academy

Following my visit to your school on 26 and 27 June 2018, 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 June 2017.

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 not fit for purpose

the school's action plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in June 2017

- Urgently improve leadership, management and governance so that they are effective in ensuring that pupils reach higher standards and make faster progress to be the best they can, by:
 - making sure that staff at all levels are accountable for the quality of their work and the difference this makes to pupils' learning, development and achievement
 - making sure that leaders at all levels are responsible for school improvement, know their roles well, and are confident and able to promote improvements for pupils
 - putting in place a coherent and rigorous approach to improving the quality of teaching and ensuring a rapid response to the issues identified
 - establishing effective and accurate assessment, target-setting and tracking systems
 - securing pupils' good attendance and putting effective strategies in place to reduce persistent absence
 - devising and implementing a sharply focused improvement plan, setting clear timescales and checking closely the impact of actions taken
 - making sure that additional funding provided for disadvantaged pupils, those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those who need to catch up is consistently effective in helping them to make rapid progress
 - quickly developing secure and effective governance so that governors play a full and effective part in bringing about improvement.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all areas of the school, by:
 - making sure that teachers have the highest expectations, including of how pupils present and complete their work
 - ensuring that teachers take full account of the current knowledge, skills and understanding of pupils when planning lessons so that all groups are challenged and stretched to do their very best at all times
 - insisting that teachers provide work that inspires and engages all groups of pupils so that they are interested and behave well
 - using assessment information effectively to identify underachievement and taking swift and effective action to tackle it.

- Urgently improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, especially for disadvantaged and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, by ensuring that:
 - there is a rapid reduction in pupils' absence so that opportunities for learning are not missed
 - pupils treat each other and adults with respect at all times
 - improvements in behaviour are secured quickly to eradicate low-level disruption in class and to reduce exclusions
 - pupils have further opportunities to learn about risks and how to keep themselves healthy and safe.

An external review of governance is recommended in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium is recommended in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 26 to 27 June 2018

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with the principal and other senior leaders, and a group of subject leaders. I met the chief executive officer of the academy trust to which the school belongs and two trustees of the trust. I also met the chief executive officer of the trust which is currently undertaking a due diligence exercise, prior to an anticipated re-brokering of the school. I spoke with pupils formally in meetings, in lessons, and informally around the school. I visited lessons across a range of subjects and years, both accompanied by the principal and alone. I looked at pupils' books in lessons and as part of a work scrutiny.

I studied a range of school documentation, including: the school's improvement plan and self-evaluation; information relating to safeguarding and child protection; records of the monitoring of teaching; plans for the use of additional funding for the pupil premium; several letters from members of the school's parent/teacher association; information about attendance and behaviour; minutes of governors' meetings; and the review of governance undertaken following the previous inspection.

Context

At the time of the previous inspection in June 2017, the school was being led by an interim executive headteacher. The current principal and deputy principal took up post in September 2017. Since the previous inspection, the governing body has been dissolved. External senior leadership support is provided by Northern Lights Teaching School Alliance, and this is set to continue into 2019. A significant proportion of staff have left the school since the previous inspection. A senior leader to take responsibility for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities was appointed in January 2018, and other teachers will join the school in September 2018.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The new principal, ably supported by the new deputy principal and the trustees, has set about an urgent and systematic rebuilding of the school's ethos and performance. He has restructured the senior leadership team so that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. As a result of this clarity, leaders have got a firm handle on making the necessary improvements identified in the previous inspection report. Leaders acknowledge that there is still much to be done; indeed, their self-evaluation is unflinchingly honest and accurate. However, leaders are moving the school forwards with purpose and with convincing effect.

The school improvement plan is a tightly focused document which addresses the areas for improvement stated in the previous inspection report. The actions are

underpinned by clear milestones, timescales and success criteria, so that progress along the way can be checked and evaluated. This clarity has supported leaders in beginning to make the necessary improvements to the quality of teaching and to raising expectations of what the pupils can achieve.

For example, leaders have introduced new systems for tracking how well pupils are doing and for improving the quality of teaching. There is also a new quality assurance process in place, so that leaders now have an accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Such systems have enabled senior leaders to more sharply hold subject leaders to account for the quality of teaching in their areas, and for the progress of pupils. Subject leaders speak positively about these new systems and the improvements which they are bringing about.

The new system for tracking pupils' progress, for instance, has introduced a fresh rigour to the accountability of subject leaders and teachers. A more regular analysis of pupils' assessment information is used as the basis for professional discussion with staff at all levels, so that refinements to plans can be made. There is a clear understanding among subject leaders that they hold significant responsibility for the progress pupils make. Steps have been taken to establish greater validity and reliability in the accuracy of the assessment of pupils' progress. The impact of this system is variable, with greater consistency needed, but there are signs that middle leaders are having a greater effect on pupils' progress than previously.

Leaders made sure that the external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding was commissioned. As a result, a comprehensive plan for the use of this funding is in place. The plan is fit for purpose because it identifies clearly the barriers to learning for the pupils eligible for the funding. It sets out clear actions to be taken and with what expected outcomes. Leaders acknowledge that there is much more to be done, with differences in outcomes between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils persisting. However, the new leaders have started the process of improving the chances of this group of pupils, after years of neglect.

Leaders have started to do more to improve the attendance of pupils, and to reduce the rates of persistent absence. However, leaders are not very clear about which strategies have really worked, and a substantial amount of work has been left to the final weeks of the year. There is an acceptance by leaders that there is more to be done, and more quickly.

Governance is effective in holding leaders to account, but there is an acknowledgement that more could be done to sharpen the depth of the challenge. To a very large degree, this is related to the school's current context, because plans made last year to re-broker the school to another multi-academy trust have not resulted in a firm decision to proceed. As a result, the trust board feel they cannot establish a clear vision for the school and support the principal fully. This is a situation which needs to be resolved as a matter of some urgency.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders have introduced a whole-school strategy for improving teaching and learning, and, as a result, there are indications that the quality of teaching is improving. There is now a common set of expectations in place regarding lesson structure and how pupils' assessment information is to be used. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are identified in seating plans, and teachers are beginning to plan effectively for them.

As a consequence of the principal's unswerving determination that all staff have the highest expectations of what pupils can achieve, much teaching reflects this ethos. There are examples of very high standards of presentation in books, linked to pupils' own improving attitudes to learning. However, some teaching does not yet have the same high expectations of all pupils. Some work in pupils' books, in lower sets for instance, is still untidy, unfinished and, at times, does not help pupils to improve. There is inconsistency in the extent to which pupils can articulate what their targets are, or how to achieve them.

There is evidence of teachers' planning which stretches and challenges pupils in their learning. Here too, though, there is variability. On occasions, pupils are compliant, but not inspired or engaged by the work. Pupils say that the level of appropriate challenge varies, within and between subjects, depending on who the teacher is.

Pupils are positive about the changes being made to teaching. They can see that there is now a common approach to lesson structure. They feel that most teachers now have higher expectations of them. Older pupils, who have been in the school long enough to make comparisons, believe that, overall, the quality of teaching is getting better.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

During the inspection, behaviour around the school was calm and orderly. Pupils spoke politely and respectfully with one another, and with adults. Conduct in lessons was similarly respectful. Pupils say that behaviour has improved since the previous inspection, partly as the result of a more consistently applied process. Some pupils, though, think that there is still some inconsistency in the application of the behaviour policy, a view acknowledged by leaders. The school's records of behaviour incidents show an improving picture.

The rate of fixed-term exclusion and permanent exclusion has increased since 2016/17. However, this is the consequence of a firm application of the school's behaviour policy this year. Leaders anticipate that the rate of exclusion will decline, now that there is a clearer understanding by pupils of leaders' expectations. This will be scrutinised at the next monitoring visit.

Pupils say that they feel safe in school and that there are no 'no-go zones'. Leaders have taken steps to manage the school's large site more effectively so that levels of supervision have been improved. Most pupils say that bullying is rare and is sorted out effectively if it happens.

Pupils are supported in their development through work on how to keep themselves safe, such as when online. They have also received assemblies and tutorials about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. They were less certain about how the school protects them from the risks of radicalisation and extremism. Leaders are aware that there is more to do here.

Attendance continues to be a stubborn problem, with overall absence and persistent absence remaining worse than average. However, there are signs that the tide is starting to turn. The rate of attendance for Year 7 and Year 8 is significantly better than the school average, and the attendance of disadvantaged pupils has improved slightly. It is accepted by leaders that while there is some improvement, the implementation of the attendance plan is not as advanced as for other plans and that actions need accelerating.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes for the Year 11 pupils, who left the school in 2017, were an improvement on outcomes in 2016, although the progress of disadvantaged pupils worsened.

As a result of the work undertaken by leaders to establish a school-wide focus on the performance of disadvantaged pupils, teachers are now more aware of who these pupils are. There is some emerging evidence that teachers are using their planning more effectively to meet the needs of disadvantaged pupils. As a vital aspect of the school's improvement journey, this will be a focus of the next monitoring visit.

Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are, according to the school's assessment information, mostly making progress in line with their targets. Where they are not, the leader for SEN and/or disabilities can demonstrate the actions she is taking to support the pupils in achieving their potential.

Through the school's new system for tracking pupils' progress, all pupils are set challenging targets. While some pupils are clear on what their targets are, and what they need to do to achieve them, others are not. As a consequence, pupils are not consistently making the progress expected of them because they sometimes lack clarity about what to do. Leaders recognise these pockets of inconsistency and that there is more work to be done here.

External support

The school has brokered formal support with the Northern Lights Teaching School Alliance.

This support has been effective in helping leaders to begin to improve the quality of teaching; in the implementation of a system to track pupils' progress; and in the implementation of a system to quality assure the performance of leaders and teachers.