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Ms Tracy Hush
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Ms Hush

Special measures monitoring inspection of Berwick Academy

Following my visit with Shelley Heseltine and John Downs, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 15 and 16 January 2019, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2018. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures

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 chair of the board of trustees, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland. This letter

will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Darren Stewart
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2018

- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that all pupils make good progress by:
 - ensuring that teachers use information about pupils' prior attainment more effectively to plan specifically for pupils' different abilities, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able
 - removing the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching across the school
 - making sure that evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning made by all leaders are accurate
 - ensuring that leaders raise their expectations of what pupils can and should achieve
 - ensuring that senior leaders and governors plan effectively to diminish the differences in outcomes and attendance between disadvantaged pupils and those of other pupils nationally
 - checking that the use of extra funding to support disadvantaged pupils is rigorously evaluated
 - making sure that the governing body is more effective at holding leaders to account by checking carefully that agreed actions have had sufficient impact.

- Further develop the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that all groups of pupils make strong progress across a wide range of subjects by ensuring that all teachers:
 - have high expectations for what pupils can achieve across all subjects and year groups
 - use the school's systems for managing behaviour consistently well and that lessons constantly engage pupils in their learning
 - develop their questioning skills so that they ask probing questions that help all pupils, including boys and disadvantaged pupils in particular, to deepen their understanding and provide extended oral responses
 - make effective use of accurate pupil assessment information to deliver teaching over time that is engaging and challenging, including for boys, the most able and disadvantaged pupils
 - check that pupils understand clearly how well they are achieving and what they need to improve, in line with the school's marking and assessment policy
 - consistently tackle and support pupils' weaknesses in literacy
 - share the good practice that is already available in the school.

- Urgently act to develop a culture of safeguarding in the school through improving

pupils' behaviour and attendance by ensuring that:

- all adults consistently apply the school's behaviour policy and challenge any poor behaviour around the school site
- all pupils and groups of pupils attend school at rates similar to or better than the national averages, including disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities
- greater attention is paid to checking that actions taken by the school and other professionals and agencies are having the desired impact and are shared effectively with all those involved to inform the school's approaches to safeguarding pupils
- the school develops a transparent and open approach that ensures that pupils, parents and carers are confident that safeguarding concerns are dealt with and resolved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken 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 funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 15 to 16 January 2019

Evidence

Inspectors observed teaching and learning across a wide range of subjects and year groups; some of these were joint observations with senior leaders. Inspectors carried out different work scrutiny activities looking at work from a range of pupils and abilities across a variety of different subject areas. Inspectors evaluated documents, including the school's improvement plan and the recently implemented senior leader improvement plan. Inspectors took into account documentation shared by the board of trustees and by the supporting trust.

Inspectors examined the school's single central record and documents relating to safeguarding, child protection, attendance and behaviour. They also evaluated documents relating to teaching and learning, and current pupils' assessment information. Inspectors met with the acting headteacher, other senior leaders, a range of middle leaders, a group of staff and four groups of pupils. Inspectors spoke to pupils at the start of the school day and during break and lunchtimes. Discussions were held with the chair of trustees and representatives from the board of trustees, and a representative from the trust currently providing support to the school.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection in July 2018, there have been notable changes to leadership at the school. The current acting headteacher took up post on 6 December 2018; prior to this, she was one of the substantive assistant headteachers. The previous acting headteacher has resumed his substantive post of deputy headteacher. At the end of the summer term, 10 staff left the school. In September 2019, three staff started at the school. There have been interim changes in the leadership of design and technology, health and early years, and physical education. A newly formed board of trustees is now in place and an appropriate scheme of delegation has been ratified and implemented. The previously formed rapid improvement group has been reconstituted by the newly formed board of trustees.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the pace for addressing the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection has been limited because of leadership instability. This instability has recently been, temporarily, ironed out. As a result, the newly appointed acting headteacher is providing much-needed strong and decisive leadership so the pace of improvement gathers urgent and necessary momentum. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching and pupils' learning and progress are highly variable and somewhat fragile.

The recently appointed acting headteacher is candid and realistic about the position of the school at present. For example, forthright self-evaluation does not shy away from those areas of the school that remain inadequate. Issues remain because leaders have taken insufficient action to address those areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. This is particularly the case, for example, with regard to high rates of pupil absence.

The acting headteacher, ably supported by the assistant headteacher with responsibility for pupils' outcomes, is vigorously introducing systems and processes to effect change and raise expectations at a more urgent pace. Together, they make a formidable team. There is a renewed focus of improvement and much-needed change. Although temporary, current changes in leadership have rejuvenated the pace of improvement. The acting headteacher's conscientiously determined approach serves pupils, staff and the wider community well. For example, staff spoken to during the inspection have unequivocal confidence in her ability to move the school forward and raise expectations and standards. Staff see the value of the systems and processes introduced. They appreciate how changes have been clearly explained to them. As a result, they strongly support leaders. Nonetheless, actions to date demonstrate limited effect in improving the quality of teaching, pupils' outcomes and pupils' attendance.

As reported at the last monitoring inspection, senior leaders' actions to improve lines of accountability are beginning to have a positive effect. For example, middle leaders have a sound understanding of what they are responsible for and who they are responsible to. As a result, they are developing the skills necessary to monitor and evaluate both pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching in the areas they lead. Overall, senior and middle leaders are using planned monitoring activities, for example observations and work scrutiny, to address weaker teaching and provide support where necessary. Professional development opportunities engage staff and provide them with valuable support so that their practice improves; this is evident as safeguarding practices and procedures show clear sign of improvement.

The school's improvement plan continues to be fit for purpose and provides leaders, at all levels, with an appropriate direction of travel to hone in on and prioritise appropriate actions, timescales, success criteria and monitoring activities to evaluate the effect of their work. This, alongside the newly formulated senior leader improvement plan, is a critical document so that improvements are actioned, monitored and evaluated at a more rapid pace.

A number of subject areas have undergone external reviews. These reviews have reaffirmed the acting headteacher's and other leaders' views regarding the strengths and weaknesses. As a result of these reviews, middle leaders, with support and direction from the acting headteacher and assistant headteacher with responsibility for pupils' outcomes, have self-evaluated the position of their subjects. Therefore, middle leaders have a more accurate view of the areas they lead.

Unlike previously, middle leaders are now using monitoring processes to develop their skills and provide support for individual staff so that the quality of teaching improves. As a result, middle leaders have clear improvement priorities. However, the effect of middle leaders' work continues to be variable in bringing about improvement at the rapid pace necessary. Nonetheless, they are held frequently to account by senior leaders. This is continuing to develop middle leaders' skills and understanding. Even so, they are unclear what actions they need to take to improve disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. Inconsistencies remain in the ability of some middle leaders to measure the effect of interventions implemented so that pupils' outcomes improve.

Safeguarding practice and processes are improving. For example, the school's single central record is compliant and the process for checking staff pre-employment is thorough. All staff have accessed appropriate and regular training so that they are up to date with current statutory requirements. There is an increased sense of vigilance across the school. Referrals are made appropriately and in a timely way; this is also the case regarding leaders' work with external agencies.

Since the previous monitoring inspection, and taking into account recommendations from the governance review in March 2018, governors have responded quickly to bring about stability at this important leadership level. A newly formed board of trustees is in place. The board of trustees have appropriate skills, expertise and experience that are providing valuable support and challenge to leaders. As a result, there is a secure foundation so that the momentum of change and improvement gathers at a pace.

The structure of governance is much clearer because the terms of reference are clear. The scheme of delegation details the roles and responsibilities of all those responsible for governance at the school. For example, the responsibilities of members of the board and the board of trustees are clearly defined. This clarity ensures that everyone knows where they stand.

The board of trustees have swiftly acted to gain an understanding of the work of leaders. They have a well-informed understanding of what is working and what is not working, particularly in relation to pupil premium spending and issues around pupils' attendance. Consequently, trustees are in a much better position to support improvement and challenge where underperformance exists.

The board of trustees, led ably by a knowledgeable chair, are proud to represent the school and the local community. They show a firm commitment and determination to support and challenge leaders so that standards improve. They are resolute that the most appropriate and beneficial external support will be sought so that standards improve at a much-needed rapid pace.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Senior leaders' monitoring of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment provides them with important and accurate information to act upon. However, while monitoring activities allow leaders to identify where effective practice exists, they also clearly identify where weaker teaching and inconsistencies remain and continue to hinder pupils' learning and progress over time. To address this, senior leaders have introduced a coaching programme so that individual teaching staff access bespoke support and guidance. The acting headteacher has a comprehensive understanding of what actions are needed to support teachers so that teaching improves at a swifter pace. For example, a 'back to basics' approach is being adopted to provide teachers with a clear structure for planning learning.

During the monitoring inspection, observations of teaching indicate that, in the main, time is not used well enough. As a result, pupils do not make appropriate gains in their learning or the progress they are capable of, particularly the most able pupils. In some instances, this is because activities are poorly planned and do not meet the varying needs of pupils. Inconsistencies in how teachers check pupils' work are contributing to pupils' misconceptions and misunderstandings not being addressed quickly enough. Thus, gaps in pupils' knowledge widen. For example, in some English, mathematics and science books scrutinised, pupils' poor literacy was not highlighted and subsequently such issues continued over a sustained period of time.

In some instances, the level of challenge for pupils in their learning is not high enough. This is particularly the case for the most able and the most able disadvantaged pupils. As a result, some teachers are only developing pupils' knowledge and understanding on a superficial level. There are limited opportunities evident for pupils to extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding about a concept or idea. Consequently, the most able pupils do not make the progress they are capable of. Far too often, expectations of what pupils can do are not high enough.

Despite staff having accessed professional development opportunities, questioning by teachers remains variable and underdeveloped. When questioning is used well, for example in art, geography and, in some instances, English, mathematics and science, it prompts and probes pupils to think hard and deeply about a concept or idea. However, questioning, largely, only checks pupils' understanding on a superficial level and does not encourage them to justify their response or think deeply about an idea.

Too frequently, learning lacks any structure or sequence. As a result, at times, learning does not explicitly link to the curricular goals or aims of the learning. This somewhat disjointed approach is further evident in pupils' books. Therefore, it is unclear what knowledge pupils should be grasping or indeed what skills they should be developing over time.

Improved assessment systems are providing senior and middle leaders with more accurate information relating to pupils' progress and gaps in their knowledge at a given time. Teachers are benefiting from working collaboratively so that there is a common, consistent standard when assessing pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills. As a result, appropriate intervention strategies are being put in place, particularly for Year 11 pupils, so they have every opportunity to achieve success in the summer 2019 examinations. Notwithstanding, it remains unclear how teachers are using improved and available pupil assessment information to inform their planning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour continues to show signs of improvement. Most pupils agree that their learning is disrupted less because they understand there will be consequences for poor behaviour. Nonetheless, concerns remain around how consistent staff are when using the school's behaviour policy. For example, some teachers apply the policy well to ensure that a considerable minority of pupils who choose to not behave well are refocused on the given learning activity. In contrast, some teachers do not address low-level disruption. Senior leaders acknowledge that they need to continue to support staff so that there is a clear understanding of the policy to bring about a consistent and fair approach.

Pupils' views about school are largely positive. Those spoken to during the inspection say that incidents of bullying are rare, and that behaviour is improving. There is an ethos of mutual respect that permeates the school. This is evident, for example, as pupils move around the school site calmly and with little fuss. Pupils say they are proud to be part of an accepting, diverse school community. They proudly told inspectors how everyone is treated equally at Berwick Academy.

Pupils' resilience is steadily developing. A large number of pupils work hard, try their best and show positive attitudes to learning. Staff praise this well and reward pupils appropriately. Unfortunately, there are still a minority of pupils who choose to misbehave and disrupt their own and others' learning. This is particularly evident as nearly 60% of the fixed-term exclusions of pupils from the school so far this academic year have been because some pupils do not conform to the raised expectations of behaviour evident and are persistently disruptive.

Leaders acknowledge that the proportion of pupils that have been excluded on a fixed-term basis is far too high. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged pupils. This is also the case for permanent exclusions. The proportion of pupils who have been permanently excluded so far this academic year is already significant and well above the national average.

Pupils spoken to during the inspection were confident that if they have an issue or a concern, staff are approachable and would help them. Pupils spoken to stated that

they feel safe at school. They could speak about the different risks they may be exposed to, for example when using social media. However, the current curriculum for fostering pupils' personal, social, health and economic education does not do enough to teach them how to be proactive and mitigate against risk or risk-taking behaviour.

Pupils' absence remains a considerable concern. It shows little sign of improvement. Leaders acknowledge that strategies implemented have not had the desired effect. As a result, too many pupils do not attend school as regularly as they should. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Overall pupil absence in the last academic year, and for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, was substantially above the national average. At this point in the academic year, overall absence, and for these groups of pupils, remains significantly high with only marginal improvement. Persistent absence remains a concern, particularly for Year 9 pupils. Consequently, these concerns have spurred trustees and the acting headteacher to implement a more strategic and rigorous policy so that improvements are swifter. The effect of this is limited at present. Nonetheless, leaders recognise that parents need to play their part in ensuring that children attend school as regularly as they should.

Outcomes for pupils

By the end of Year 11 in 2018, pupils' outcomes, in the vast majority of subjects, remained inadequate. Pupils who had high prior attainment achieved significantly less well than other pupils nationally with a similar starting point. Pupils' attainment was highly variable. Disadvantaged pupils' outcomes, particularly in English, modern foreign languages and humanities subjects, are inadequate and of grave concern.

While the board of trustees and senior leaders have a more informed understanding of how pupil premium funding is used, there remains an incoherent strategy in place for this group of pupils' outcomes and experiences to improve at a much-needed, accelerated pace. As a result, outcomes for current disadvantaged pupils remain highly variable and their underachievement is compounded by poor rates of attendance. The barriers these pupils face are not explicitly shared or understood by staff. Therefore, in the main, their needs are not met.

While most senior leaders do not shy away from having difficult conversations or putting in place steps to tackle weaker teaching, currently, such steps have had limited effect on improving teaching. For example, work in a variety of pupils' books, across a range of subjects, is highly variable and inconsistent. As a result, it is evident that current pupils' outcomes remain weak.

The acting headteacher and the assistant headteacher with responsibility for pupils' outcomes are under no illusion that there is a lot of work to do so that pupils' outcomes improve. The intervention strategies starting to take shape are credible and necessary. However, leaders at all levels are clear that they must monitor and

evaluate the impact of such strategies so that long-term improvements are sustained.

External support

Support continues to be brokered from external sources. The external reviews commissioned regarding governance, safeguarding and SEND have been particularly beneficial and the recommendations have been used supportively by school leaders. Some external support has had limited effect.