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Mr Andrew Rodgers
Principal
Unity City Academy
Ormesby Road
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Dear Mr Rodgers

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Unity City Academy

Following my visit to your school on 17 December 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring 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 to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received successive judgements of serious weaknesses and then requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

Senior leaders and the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- continue the work already started to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence
- continue to reduce the rate of permanent and fixed-term exclusion of pupils from the school
- maintain the focus on improving the quality of teaching, especially teachers' use of questions and assessment of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding
- improve pupils' achievement at the end of key stage 4 in English, mathematics and the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) suite of subjects

- review how appropriate and effective the school's vocational curriculum and careers guidance offer is in supporting pupils to make a successful and sustained transition to further education at post-16
- implement the school's literacy strategy, with a particular focus on helping the weakest readers to catch up quickly
- continue the development of what, when and how the curriculum is taught so that intervention actions to fill gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills at the end of key stage 4 is the exception rather than typical practice.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with: the principal; other senior leaders; the national director of secondaries for the multi-academy trust to which the school belongs; the principal of a school within the multi-academy trust which is providing support to the school; students; and the governing body, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Leaders' plans for school improvement were reviewed.

I visited a number of lessons across year groups in English, mathematics and science. While in lessons, I talked to pupils and looked at their workbooks. I met with leaders to discuss attendance, behaviour, the curriculum and the school's actions to improve pupils' literacy. I considered a range of documentation, including school plans and evaluations. I talked with several staff, including teachers and support staff. I checked the school's processes for the safe recruitment of staff and reviewed leaders' systems for helping pupils in need of extra help.

Context

At the time of the previous inspection, the school was led by an executive principal from the trust, providing support to the principal and other leaders. Since then, the trust has withdrawn the support of the executive principal, and the school is now led solely by the principal. A senior leader with strategic responsibility for literacy was appointed in September 2019, and a literacy leader is due to join the school in January 2020.

Main findings

At the previous section 5 inspection, you were asked to address three main areas.

Firstly, you were asked to improve attendance and reduce the use of exclusion. There are strong indications that you have been successful in addressing these areas for improvement.

Overall, attendance has improved. There are fewer pupils who are persistently

absent. The attendance of particular groups of pupils is showing encouraging signs of improvement. This has happened because of the action you have taken. You have made attendance a priority. There have been changes to the way you monitor and respond to attendance, including tighter alignment to the local authority's processes. Most importantly, you have improved the culture of attendance. Pupils confirm that attendance has been prioritised and that it is not acceptable, or possible, to take time off school without justified reason. However, attendance is still below where it needs to be, and persistent absence is still above where it needs to be. You are clear that there is more still to be done.

You have taken action to reduce the use of exclusion. The rate of permanent exclusion fell substantially during the previous academic year, compared with the year before. The rates of fixed-term exclusion and repeat fixed-term exclusion have also reduced since the previous inspection. The effective implementation of the behaviour policy has been instrumental in bringing about this improvement. You believe that improvements to the curriculum and to the quality of teaching have led to pupils wanting to learn and therefore behaving better. All of the staff I spoke to said that behaviour was typically good. The pupils I met with said that behaviour has improved and that it is unusual for their lessons to be disrupted. You are rightly focused on further reducing the use of exclusion. During the inspection, behaviour in classrooms was calm and purposeful with polite speech between pupils and staff.

The second area you were asked to address was the quality of teaching. You have introduced the 'Unity City Academy Teaching and Learning Standard' framework to make improvements in this area. As a result, there is a consistent approach to teaching across the school. Pupils told me that they think that teachers, and teaching, have improved since the previous inspection. The pupils I spoke with said that they felt that in each of their subjects, it was clear to them what they were learning, how it connected to what they had learned previously, and where the learning was heading.

Teachers use questions very effectively to check that pupils have understood the intended learning. However, teachers are less confident in using questions to probe pupils' understanding more deeply, or to challenge them to stretch their thinking. The school policy is for the use of regular 'baseline' assessments to identify pupils' understanding. While this was in place in each of the subjects visited, there is variability in the extent to which teachers make effective use of the information it gives them about pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding.

You were asked to improve the quality of teaching so that pupils would make better progress. Outcomes for Year 11 in the summer 2019 GCSE examinations show signs of improvement in pockets, but overall they remain well below the national averages for progress. The exception is the 'open' group of subjects (the subjects other than English, mathematics, science, languages, history and geography), where pupils performed well above the national average for progress. The overall progress score was markedly higher than the previous year.

Thirdly, you were asked to make improvements to aspects of leadership and management. You commissioned a review into the use of the pupil premium funding. There is new leadership in place for this area. Plans and processes are now aligned with the trust's approach to the management of pupil premium funding.

Since the previous inspection, you have reinstated a three-year key stage 3 and a two-year key stage 4. You have reflected on the opportunities for pupils in key stage 3 to access arts and technology-based subjects. At key stage 3, pupils now access a full EBacc curriculum as preparation for key stage 4, should such a curriculum be appropriate at that point.

You have identified that a substantial proportion of pupils who move into post-16 further education provision do not remain on their courses. You have started to explore why this might be the case and how, or if, it is related to the curriculum offer at key stage 4 and the careers guidance pupils receive. This is an area which requires a formal review.

Leaders have introduced a new literacy policy, under new leadership. It is early days, but there are signs of the policy in action. However, it is patchy at present. Not all teachers use the expected strategies, with pupils struggling to manage the literacy demands placed on them at times. Occasionally, teachers' own literacy is not accurate. You have a plan for prioritising reading. However, more thought needs to be given to how the weakest readers will be supported.

It is evident that there is still a legacy of the poor performance which led to the school being judged to have serious weaknesses in 2016, with gaps in pupils' learning being covered in Year 11. You have made numerous new appointments to the teaching and leadership staff to address these historic weaknesses. You know that there is much more to do to ensure that such gaps do not emerge in the first place.

External support

The school largely receives support from the multi-academy trust to which it belongs.

The school is receiving additional support from the Department for Education through the One Vision programme.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Middlesbrough. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw

Her Majesty's Inspector