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Mr Ruston Atkinson
Principal
NCEA Duke's Secondary School
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Dear Mr Atkinson

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of NCEA Duke's Secondary School

Following my visit to your school on 20 January 2022, 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 March 2020. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

This was the first routine inspection the school had received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. I discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of Northumberland Church of England Academy Trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Steve Wren
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 20 January 2022

Context

At the time of the last section 5 inspection, you were serving as acting principal. You have since been appointed to the role permanently. Since the previous inspection, you have appointed three new senior leaders, including a new deputy headteacher. There have been relatively few changes in the staffing of other positions within the school.

Since the time of the previous inspection, you have developed new provision, 'The Beacon', for those pupils who need additional support. Staff in this provision started working with pupils in September 2021.

The pandemic has caused some priorities to be adjusted. For example, curriculum development initially focused on remote provision as the majority of pupils were accessing their education at home. Notwithstanding these necessary adjustments, you have been able to undertake development work in the key areas identified at the time of the previous inspection.

In this monitoring visit, I focused on exploring the steps you have taken to improve: the quality of the curriculum and its implementation, ensuring it meets the learning needs of pupils; pupils' attendance, especially of pupils who are disadvantaged or have additional needs; and pupils' behaviour in and out of lessons.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Leaders have taken significant strides towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation. They have focused on addressing the root causes of problems rather than looking for quick fixes that will not have lasting impact. This focus, coupled with effective communication and careful consideration of staff workload, have ensured that staff in school understand the changes being made and are fully committed to delivering them. You have successfully changed perceptions of what pupils at NCEA Duke's can achieve.

You have restructured the leadership team. Getting the right people in the right places, and giving each clear accountability for improving the areas of the school for which they are responsible has been fundamental. You expect them to research what is effective within other schools and to use this thinking to help develop approaches that will work in your school. You provide challenge and support for those responsible for improving areas of the school through regular scheduled meetings.

Leaders have developed a culture in which school improvement is everyone's responsibility. You speak about 'leaders at all levels' taking responsibility for improving the school. The 'see, share, solve' approach encourages all members of staff to come forward if they identify an aspect of the school that they feel could be enhanced.

Following the previous inspection, trustees formed an academy improvement board (AIB) to provide specific additional expertise. The AIB consists of the principal, some trustees, a representative of the local authority, the chief operating officer (CEO) of the trust, the director of education of the diocese and some associate members. The AIB offers appropriate challenge and support to the school. It has set up highly effective systems to ensure that it fully understands the current strengths and the next steps to be taken in the development of the school. The AIB makes a highly effective contribution to the progress of the school in coming out of serious weaknesses.

Since the previous inspection, you have prioritised development of the curriculum. External support and training have been provided for your faculty leaders to develop their knowledge and understanding of what makes an effective curriculum. Faculty leaders, working with their teams, have developed curriculums that clearly identify key learning aims for each year. It is now clear what pupils need to know, and when. As a result of your close work with colleagues in primary schools, these curriculums build coherently and consistently on what pupils have learned previously. You have used external support to assure yourself of the quality of the new curriculum.

Your 'DNA' model for good practice in teaching and learning has been reviewed and relaunched. It clearly identifies strategies that you want teachers to use within the classroom. You have ensured that teachers are provided with opportunities to work with others to develop their use of the agreed strategies.

Pupils speak very positively about the changes in the quality of education they are receiving. They uniformly say that it is stronger than when the school was last inspected. However, they identify that there are still some areas for improvement, for example in teachers breaking complex explanations down into more manageable pieces.

Assessment is at an earlier stage of development. Leaders have identified that more effective assessment will establish the effectiveness of their curriculum in supporting pupils to know, remember and do more over the longer term. This will help you to make adjustments to improve the curriculum.

Leaders identify that there is still more work to do around the quality of education that pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) receive. There has been a positive change in culture. Staff increasingly accept that the progress of pupils with SEND is the responsibility of all staff, not just the SEND team. The Beacon provision is new this year. Leaders are currently refining the curriculum for pupils who access this provision for all or part of the school day.

At the time of the previous inspection, a new behaviour policy had just been introduced. You have ensured that this policy is applied consistently by providing regular staff training and 'scripts' that teachers can use to defuse potentially difficult situations. These scripts ensure that the policy is enacted with kindness and care. It supports pupils to make the right decisions and to take responsibility for their behaviour. Staff and pupils

are unanimous in praising the transformation since the previous inspection. It is allowing teachers to teach, and pupils to learn.

Staff from the school have worked closely with families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included delivering food parcels to those in need, arranging physical education lessons that the whole family could be involved in, and helping parents and carers to support their children with remote learning. These initiatives, and more, have strengthened home–school relationships and allowed you to tackle effectively some of the causes of pupil absence. Leaders have transformed the way that attendance is managed in school. Each element of your attendance programme works in unison to address causes of poor attendance. Pupil absence, for non-COVID-19-related reasons, has significantly reduced. The introduction of the Beacon provision has helped, along with direct work with families, to particularly improve attendance for those pupils with additional needs.

You have identified that punctuality to school and to lessons is now an area for focus. You have recently introduced some systems to help improve punctuality. It is, as yet, too early to observe whether these steps are having the desired impact.

Additional support

External support from ONE Vision partner schools and a school improvement partner has aided curriculum development. These professionals have worked with faculty leaders to develop their knowledge and understanding of effective curriculum design. Their evaluations have provided you with assurance as to the quality of the new curriculums.

Two external reviews of SEND provision have helped you to refine your development plan so that pupils with SEND are better supported.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and members of the senior leadership team with responsibilities for the curriculum, teaching and learning, safeguarding and attendance. I reviewed a range of documentation you provided. Accompanied by a senior leader, I visited a number of lessons from different faculty areas and spoke with a number of faculty leaders and teachers. I met formally with a group of pupils, spoke to others informally and observed pupils at social times and moving between lessons. I met with members of the AIB and with the CEO of the Northumberland Church of England Academy Trust.