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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
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23 November 2023

James Wilson
Principal
Waterhead Academy
Huddersfield Road
Oldham
Greater Manchester
OL4 3NY

Dear Mr Wilson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Waterhead Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 18 and 19 October 2023, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2022.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, Amanda Downing, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI), and I discussed with you, other leaders and staff the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also met with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the South Pennine Academies Trust and held discussions with members of the trust board and the local academy body. I also spoke to a representative of the local authority. I also visited lessons, spoke to pupils and scrutinised documentation such as the trust's statement of action and the school's self-evaluation document. I have considered all this in coming to our judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as requiring special measures.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

There have been substantial changes in leadership at all levels and in governance since the previous inspection. You were appointed as acting principal in January 2023 and then assumed the substantive post in the spring term of 2023. A new executive principal and senior vice-principal were also appointed. At the same time, a new CEO who was in a designate role took over operations and a new, experienced chair of the local academy board was appointed. Four new trustees were appointed to the trust board to broaden expertise and increase capacity.

Leaders at all levels have accepted the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. This has led to urgent and effective actions to tackle the most pressing shortcomings at the school, especially pupils' behaviour. The comprehensive action plan includes a range of appropriate strategies to bring about further improvement.

Since the previous inspection, eradicating poor behaviour has been a key priority. A new approach to managing pupils' behaviour is now in place. This has laid the foundations for clear behaviour systems that are understood by everyone. Expectations of pupils' behaviour have risen, and most staff follow the new approach consistently well. As a result, pupils and staff remarked on the considerable improvements that they have witnessed in behaviour. This is helping many more pupils to learn without unnecessary disruption. It is also fostering a greater enjoyment of school. Nevertheless, the new approaches have not been wholly successful with all pupils. There remains a small but significant group of pupils who continue to cause disruption in the school.

Suspensions from school are declining over time. However, the number of pupils who are removed from classes and taught in the internal isolation unit is high. Currently, the education on offer in this internal provision is not good enough. It does not enable pupils to keep up with the curriculum content that they should learn. Consequently, gaps in their knowledge widen over time. This has a negative impact on their achievement.

Truancy from lessons is also becoming much less common than it was in the past. Increased staffing capacity means that pupils who choose not to go to lessons are spotted and gently ushered to their classrooms. As a result, there is less disruption in corridors and more pupils are punctual to lessons.

Reducing pupils' absence from school has been a key focus for leaders at all levels. New systems and procedures are in place that enable the school to track and analyse attendance far more rigorously than in the past. This is beginning to have an impact, especially for pupils in Year 7. Nevertheless, some pupils are absent too frequently.

Alongside the improvements in pupils' behaviour, there have been positive changes to the overall curriculum offer. Pupils in key stage 3 now study the full range of national curriculum subjects. There is also a greater range of subject option choices at key stage

4. An increasing proportion of pupils are choosing to study the English Baccalaureate suite of subjects. Improvements to subject curriculums are at an earlier stage of development. With the support of external expertise, leaders are beginning to review subject curriculums to ensure that they enable pupils to build their knowledge progressively over time. However, this work is still in its infancy. Whole-school training has been helpful in gaining a common understanding of curriculum delivery and assessment strategies. Even so, this is not bearing enough fruit because the curriculum content that pupils should learn is not finalised.

Pupils who find reading difficult are being identified accurately. Some of these pupils are receiving suitable support to help them overcome the gaps in their reading knowledge. For example, some pupils are having the chance to strengthen their grasp of phonics. However, the support for other pupils, especially those in key stage 4, who struggle to read with fluency, accuracy and confidence is not as cohesive. This means that some pupils find it difficult to access the full curriculum. This hampers their achievement.

The personal, social, health and economic education curriculum is beginning to have a greater impact on pupils' personal development. This is because staff's expertise has improved, and pupils have sufficient time to learn all that they should in readiness for life in modern Britain. Although some derogatory language persists, pupils said that such incidents were less frequent. Furthermore, pupils have greater confidence in the school's actions to deal with such unpleasant name-calling.

The school has accessed support from within the multi-academy trust and has also brokered external expertise to address the areas of weakness identified at the time of the previous inspection. This is ensuring a joined-up approach to improvement work. It is leading to sustainable systems. The foundations for further improvement are secure.

Leadership capacity has strengthened. The roles and responsibilities of new appointments are clear. Governance is increasingly effective in holding leaders at all levels to account for their work. Members of the local academy board and trustees maintain a sharp focus on leaders' actions, providing both support and challenge for the school as it continues its journey of improvement.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of the South Pennine Academies Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Oldham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Niamh Howlett
His Majesty's Inspector

