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Mr Denis Fay
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Fay

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ULVERSTON VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL

Following my visit with Tanya Harber Stuart HMI, Chris Penter, Terry McDermott and Andy Henderson, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 15 and 16 April 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed, except with the agreement of the monitoring inspector.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF ULVERSTON VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 April 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work; scrutinised the documents provided by the school; and met with the acting headteacher, groups of staff, including those with leadership responsibilities, groups of pupils, the chair of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Soon after the school was made subject to special measures, the LA arranged for a partnership with a successful school. The substantive headteacher has ceased working at the school. The acting headteacher took charge at the beginning of March 2008.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement remains inadequate, primarily because of inadequacies in the quality of teaching. The school very recently launched an easily understood system which shows the standards of each student's work across subjects and indicates whether the standards are as high as they should be. This shows that there is still too much underachievement. There are, however, signs of some improvement notably in mathematics. Here, students whose work was at a level below what they were capable of were identified and provided with extra sessions. Their standards rose as a result. However, such improvements have made only limited inroads into students' underachievement across the school. Much more needs to be done to step up the rate of progress that students make day by day in their lessons.

Students in the sixth form continue to make at least satisfactory progress.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- Improve achievement and raise standards across the school – inadequate

Personal development and well-being

The positive features noted in the previous inspection remain. Students generally behave well and they have positive attitudes to learning. They respond well in lessons when expectations are high, the activities interesting, and the pace demanding. In dull, slow paced lessons they show less enthusiasm and, occasionally, little commitment to learning and they do not pay sufficient attention to the teacher or their work when the activities do not motivate them.

Attendance is broadly average. It has recently improved a little as a result of a drive to reduce the number of students with very poor attendance and to promote and reward good attendance.

The school now uses internal isolation to ensure that pupils who misbehave in lessons do not disrupt the others' learning. Staff believe this is having a positive impact.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning varies greatly and remains inadequate overall. The lessons seen on this visit ranged in quality from outstanding to inadequate. Too much of the teaching is inadequate or, at best, satisfactory. Not enough is of good quality and only a little is outstanding. Inspectors' observations of lessons showed that the senior staff's evaluations of the quality of teaching are largely accurate.

In the more effective lessons seen, teachers used a variety of approaches and engaged students with a range of related activities. Work was pitched at a demanding level and students rose to the challenge well. They applied themselves well, worked confidently, explored ideas in discussion, and made real strides in their learning. In these lessons teachers showed skill at matching their questions to students' different levels of ability so all were challenged and moved on in their understanding.

There are common weaker elements in teaching which is inadequate or simply satisfactory. They include: not enough tailoring of work to match pupils' varied learning needs; slow pace and lack of challenge, which sometimes leads to low level disruption; lack of clarity about what pupils are expected to learn in the lesson; limited opportunities for pupils to work things out for themselves and develop independent learning skills; and weak marking. A number of these weaknesses were also seen, though to a considerably lesser degree, in some lessons that were good overall. This shows that these shortcomings need to be addressed across the school, alongside the drive to ratchet up the quality of the least effective teaching.

The school has introduced a new format for planning lessons but this has not, of itself, raised the quality of planning sufficiently. The use of assessment data as a lever to drive up standards is at only an embryonic stage. Underachievement is now identified but the available data is not yet used widely enough, either to challenge and tackle underachievement or to influence the planning of lessons. Too often there is little attempt to adapt the work to meet the needs of different ability groups, even when a wide range of attainment within the class is noted. Too many teachers tend to teach to the middle and, inevitably, some pupils do not make the progress they should. Furthermore, when plans indicate that work will be matched according to students' levels of attainment, that differentiation is not always seen in the lesson.

Some very good marking was seen. Such marking was clear about the standard of the students' work in relation to their targets and it gave a helpful commentary on students' work and how they could improve their performance next time. However, marking is by no means consistent across the school and some is too cursory to be helpful to the students. Furthermore, teachers sometimes accept careless, poorly presented work. Consequently, some students are not clear about what they need to do in order to improve and do not set high enough standards for themselves.

At present the school has no senior leader responsible for promoting effective teaching and learning. Nonetheless, members of the leadership team and heads of departments observe lessons and give teachers feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching. The quality and usefulness of such feedback varies considerably. Nevertheless, on the basis of the observations, common shortcomings have been recognised and some extra training was provided for teachers early in March. Many staff think that this has already led to a greater emphasis on the extent of students' learning in lessons. The school is at an early stage of determining teachers' individual development needs and arranging bespoke training and support; senior staff believe this has already had some limited positive impact.

Staff have positive relationships with students. They are committed to the students' well-being and to providing for their pastoral needs. The school has taken action, though only very recently, to meet government requirements in relation to safeguarding procedures.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- Improve the quality of teaching – inadequate
- Ensure safeguarding procedures meet current government requirements – satisfactory

Leadership and management

Pupils, staff, governors and the LA all see signs of recent change for the better in the school; morale is higher and there is a sense of optimism for the future. The acting headteacher is seen as approachable and a visible presence around the school. Although much remains to be done, the foundations are being laid on which to build improvement. Staff and governors say communication has improved. Staff feel supported, empowered and more valued. Teamwork at senior leadership level is strengthening. There is also optimism and commitment among middle leaders but much of the planning for improvement at this level is weak.

Whole-school planning for improvement addresses the areas for improvement that were identified when the school was made subject to special measures. It is not, however, sufficiently sharply focused or rigorous to underpin the significant improvement that is needed to raise pupils' achievement and standards. It is clear what will be done. What is less clear is how the impact of all the planned activity will be checked and the next steps determined. For example, the school does not monitor and evaluate, with sufficient rigour, the effectiveness of what it is doing to promote good behaviour, to improve attendance and punctuality and to reduce exclusions. This means its view of the effectiveness of various strategies is essentially anecdotal; it does not know for sure what works well and what is less effective.

The school's specialist status for mathematics and computing has had minimal impact on the school's overall effectiveness. It neither promotes the ethos of a specialism nor significantly influences students' achievement or the quality of provision across the school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- Ensure leaders and managers at all levels set clear and agreed priorities, monitor their implementation and evaluate their impact – inadequate
- Ensure that assessment data is effectively used to identify, challenge and address underachievement – inadequate

External support

The LA has provided adequate support despite an unavoidable change of link school improvement officer attached to the school. The LA's statement of action is satisfactory. The LA has undertaken a review of the school's work in every subject which has highlighted areas which need to be improved. It has also facilitated the change in leadership which seems to be winning staff round and it has helped the school overcome the deficit that inhibited development work.

Priorities for further improvement

As a first priority, the school should tackle the areas for improvement identified when it was made subject to special measures with greater urgency and rigour.