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Mr David Thornton
Headteacher
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East Campus
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Dear Mr Thornton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to North Durham Academy, Durham

Following my visit to your academy on 17 September 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you, your staff, governors and members of the Trust made available to discuss with me the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the co-sponsors are taking incisive and urgent action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. However, the academy should take further action to:

- Accelerate the planned improvements in students' attainment and progress, especially in mathematics.
- Continue to tackle any teaching which is not improving at a fast enough pace to ensure that it reaches at least a consistently good overall standard.
- Continue to develop and refine the academy development plan to make it easier for all leaders and managers to accurately and regularly assess the progress of each improvement aspect over the life of the plan.
- Ensure that all visits by governors to meet with staff, or to observe the work of the academy, results in a written note of visit, as additional evidence of the increasing capacity of governors to hold the academy to account.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with you and other senior leaders, The Chief Executive of the New College Durham (NCD) Academies Trust, The Chair and a parent member of the Governing Body, and two senior officers from the local authority. All meetings focused on the progress being made by the academy since the previous inspection. A range of documents was read, including the latest version of the academy development plan, and separate progress updates relating to the areas for improvement from the previous inspection.

Context

Since the previous inspection, 11 teaching staff have left the academy. From September of this new academic year, 28 new staff members have joined the academy, including a new assistant principal, subject and administrative staff. However, the most significant contextual change has been the move to the new building from the previous school sites. The move has been done with minimum disruption to the students, and during this visit there was a calm and productive ethos in the way staff and students were using the building.

Main findings

Senior managers have responded positively to the issues raised in the recent inspection report. They have produced a very detailed academy development plan, which skilfully blends actions to address the improvement areas raised in the inspection report with other academy generated priorities and actions. However, whilst the plan forensically identifies some very important issues for future improvement, it could be improved further with a clearer set of milestones and success measures, which relate directly to the identified actions. Also, a re-ordering of the priorities so that key performance indicators for each action are more clearly identified will help senior leaders, governors and sponsors to assess quickly and accurately the rate of progress for each indicator over the life of the plan.

The governing body, the NCD Trust and local authority involvement with the academy has continued in a focused way since the inspection. These stakeholders share the same vision as academy staff of what is needed to raise standards and provide all students with an educational experience that sets them up successfully for their transition into post-academy life. This shared commitment to improvement is very clear in the actions being taken to challenge and support the academy to improve. For example, some members of the governing body are actively involved in meeting with senior staff and in observing aspects of the academy's work. However, these activities have yet to attain a more formal status whereby they result in written outcomes, which can be used as evidence of the governing body's greater involvement in monitoring and evaluating the work of the academy.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

There are very effective links between the academy and its co-sponsors, which includes the local authority. This is ensuring that external support is both challenging and relevant to the needs of the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and Corporate Director:
Children's and Adults' Services for Durham.

Yours sincerely

Brian Blake
Her Majesty's Inspector