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11 February 2015

Mr John Meagher

Headteacher

Failsworth School

Brierley Avenue

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Dear Mr Meagher

Special measures monitoring inspection of Failsworth School

Following my visit to your school on 10 February 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in October 2014.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, representatives of the governing body, representatives of the local authority, members of the senior leadership team and a group of students. Telephone conversations took place with members of the newly formed achievement board, one of which is the National Leader of Education (NLE) who is supporting the school. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were also looked at. The single central record was checked.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection a deputy headteacher is moving to a new school at Easter. A replacement will join at Easter. The leader for Key Stage 4 mathematics

has left the school together with two other members of the mathematics team. The lead practitioner in mathematics has also left and has been replaced with another lead practitioner. A small number of other teachers have also left and the majority of these have been replaced with new staff who leaders believe will bring additional strength to the school.

The governors are now complemented by the Failsworth Achievement Board which has the responsibility of increasing the accountability of the school leaders. The board consists of experienced educationalists including the school improvement partner, the NLE supporting the school, and a representative from the local authority who chairs the board; the Chair and vice-Chair of the Governing Body also attend.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The governors, senior leaders and staff have, despite initial immense disappointment, now fully accepted the findings of the section 5 inspection. The local authority's statement of action demonstrates its determination to improve the effectiveness of the school as fast as possible and has put in place robust and appropriate plans to secure the leadership of the school going forward. This includes the Failsworth Achievement Board which meets regularly; minutes of the meetings clearly show how well it now holds those with responsibility for school improvement to account.

Governors and the achievement board now need to ensure that any actions required are carried out in a timely way in order for them to have maximum impact on raising standards for all students. The board also needs to be clear that the external support being brought into the school is well coordinated, is targeted to secure maximum impact and that no key aspects for improvement are overlooked.

Much of the improvement work that has taken place to date has been focused on ensuring that the current Year 11 students achieve their targets. However, this strategy is too short sighted in helping the school to progress towards removal of special measures. Insufficient consideration has been given to targeting improvement in year groups lower down the school. As a consequence, too many students fail to make the progress they are capable of. This is particularly the case for boys of middle ability and for those students who are eligible for support through the pupil premium funding (additional funding provided for those students who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those children who are looked after by the local authority).

The school improvement plan covers most of what needs to be done to move the school forward and raise standards. The plan would benefit from making clear that

the focus is on improving teaching and learning in the areas where there is significant underperformance. The plan currently fails to indicate key milestones and timelines so that governors and the achievement board can determine whether improvements are being secured fast enough.

School leaders are now much clearer about the roots and extent of underperformance in the school because they have more detailed data relating to the progress of individual students. This is particularly the case for the performance of students in Key Stage 4 where the shift to horizontal year groups means that the senior leaders and newly appointed progress leaders have a clear focus on what is going on. Those responsible, including subject leaders and class teachers, are being increasingly held tightly to account for the progress of their students.

This, however, is not the case in Key Stage 3 where the vertical tutor group system still exists. This means that there is not the same level of scrutiny on students' progress and, as a consequence, teachers are unable to target support and intervention in a timely way to prevent students from falling behind.

Students feel that tutor time in Key Stage 3 is not helping them and they report that the time is spent only reading and doing homework.

There is now more focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Coaching walks take place regularly and areas for improvement for individual staff are identified and appropriate intervention is put in place. However, the focus of the walks is placed on Year 11, despite the fact that underperformance exists throughout the school. The coaching walks, although supportive, lack the rigour and precision that is required to raise the quality of teaching quickly. They focus on teaching strategies but fail to make sufficient links between teaching and the impact it has on students' learning and progress.

The pace of improvement is further compromised by the continuation of '100 minute lessons' in some subjects. Students said that they are 'great for practical lessons like catering and music' but for academic subjects they struggle to keep focused for that length of time. The least able find it hardest of all.

Reading time allocated at the start of every Key Stage 3 lesson aims to develop students' literacy skills and engender in them a love of reading. However, this approach is detracting from the core learning in many lessons because not all teachers systematically develop these skills as the lesson continues. Good practice seen in art, for example, where the teacher skilfully drew on the subject content of the lesson to extend students' literacy, is not consistently the case across all subjects.

The school has plans to change the curriculum to make sure more time is spent in core subjects, especially English and mathematics. Consideration is also being given to how the curriculum can be designed to provide clear progression routes through the school and beyond to enable students to study things they find most interesting. The students spoken to said that they would like more help in making sure they pick the best options for their future careers or to help them decide what they wanted to do in the future.

The work seen in the inclusion areas of the school was particularly strong. There is a great emphasis in making sure that all vulnerable students are supported in an appropriate way and data show significant success here. This is an area to celebrate and the school should consider seeking external validation, such as the Inclusion Quality Mark.

It is clear that, in spite of some inherent weaknesses, there are talented leaders and teachers at Failsworth. The governors and achievement board now need to make sure that the structures are in place so that leaders quickly make decisions and take more immediate action to enable the school to move more rapidly on its journey to success.

The governors know what they need to do and the fact that they are now asking 'so what?' and 'where's the evidence?' shows that they are taking their role seriously and are determined to bring about rapid and sustainable change.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The local authority's action plan is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose with the additions suggested.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed without my prior approval.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Executive Director Health and Wellbeing for Oldham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Mullaney

Associate Inspector

Appointed as an Associate Inspector under the powers relating to additional inspectors, in paragraph 11 of Part 2 of Schedule V2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006