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5 June 2015

Mr John Meagher
Headteacher
Failsworth School
Brierley Avenue
Failsworth
Manchester
M35 9HA

Dear Mr Meagher

Special measures monitoring inspection of Failsworth School

Following my visit with Derek Barnes and Timothy Gartside, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 3 and 4 June 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in October 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection without discussing the appointment with me first.

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

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

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least consistently good across all year groups and quickens students' progress, especially in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - the tasks set for all groups and abilities of students, including boys, the most able and the disadvantaged, provide them with a good level of challenge and enable them to achieve their potential
 - marking regularly tells students how well they are doing and what they need to do next to make further progress
 - teachers' questioning encourages and promotes students' further thinking and progress.

- Improve students' literacy skills by making sure that:
 - the school reviews its literacy policy to ensure that it addresses all aspects of literacy and that it is delivered in ways that meet the needs of all groups and abilities of students effectively
 - literacy teaching focuses on developing students' reading, use of grammar and the accuracy of their spelling and punctuation
 - expectations of the presentation, handwriting and layout of students' work are consistently high across the school.

- Ensure that students have good attitudes to learning by making sure that:
 - teaching effectively involves and interests students so that they want to learn
 - there are consistently high expectations of students' behaviour for learning
 - all staff implement the behaviour policy promptly and consistently in all lessons.

- Increase the impact of leadership and management at all levels by ensuring that:
 - all leaders and managers have an accurate understanding of what data are saying about students' progress and that they ensure that teachers use this information effectively to set work that meets the students' needs
 - leaders and managers identify exactly what the weaknesses in teaching are in their areas of responsibility and that they check to make certain that these weaknesses have been robustly addressed
 - students' targets are realistically challenging so that all students can attain their potential.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 3 to 4 June 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, a group of recently and newly qualified teachers, the Chair and vice-Chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the local authority, the coordinator of the local authority's peer review strategy and the national leader in education (NLE) who is a member of the Failsworth Achievement Board (FAB). Inspectors visited 21 lessons, of which a significant number were joint observations with senior leaders.

Inspectors spoke to groups of students representing all year groups and undertook several learning walks which included observations of family time. They observed students at break and lunchtime and visited assembly and paired reading sessions. Inspectors scrutinised a very wide range of documentation, particularly focusing on the school's current data for all years and all groups, the peer reviews of English and mathematics, the updated improvement plan and the school's self-evaluation form. They also looked at minutes of meetings of the governing body and FAB, data pertaining to attendance and behaviour, records of the monitoring of teaching and the associated support and training for teachers.

The single central record was also checked.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection the new deputy headteacher has joined the school, together with a lead practitioner in mathematics. A number of staff are leaving the school in the summer and replacements have been appointed.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Current data indicate that the GCSE results for all groups of students are set to rise this year and that the school should achieve its targets. These data have been subject to considerable, robust, internal and external checking and inspectors share the school's confidence that there will be a significant improvement in performance.

Data are now widely available to all staff and where teaching is strongest, teachers are using them much more effectively to plan lessons that help students make better progress from their different starting points.

Improvements in teaching are also contributing to the better progress that students are now making. Better questioning and the more effective use of feedback to support learning and progress is bringing about rapid improvements, which was clear both during lessons and also in students' books.

In both English and mathematics there is clear evidence that standards are improving at Key Stage 4. In English, Year 11 students have taken three trial examinations which have been checked externally and the results demonstrate a rise in achievement and progress. There is a similar picture in mathematics.

The school has placed much more focus on Key Stage 3. As a result, the proportion of students making expected progress is set to improve, particularly in English. This has been brought about by the improvements to the Key Stage 3 curriculum. In addition, more regular assessments of students' reading and writing skills have enabled teachers to focus upon specific weaknesses and the Key Stage 3 English curriculum is now preparing students well for the requirements at GCSE with the introduction of similar questions and skills.

In Key Stage 3 mathematics, the assessments have recently been altered and now better match the curriculum that the students follow. Again this is giving the school and individual teachers much more relevant data which they are now using more effectively to secure good quality learning. However, there remains a legacy of underachievement which the school has recognised and is addressing. New senior leaders, who are mathematics specialists, have a far more 'hands on' approach to the department and even in a short time the impact of their contribution is clear.

The school currently sets targets which are in line with national expectations. Consideration should be given to making the targets more ambitious, especially for the most able.

While overall this is a much better picture, there are still areas of concern, including the gaps between those students in receipt of the pupil premium (additional funding provided for those disadvantaged students who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority) and those who are not, which remain too large.

The quality of teaching

The leadership of teaching and learning and teacher development is impressive. There is now a rigorous and robust system of lesson observations and learning walks, together with data analysis and work scrutiny, which allow leaders to identify specific weaknesses in teaching. This is accompanied by procedures for rapidly providing relevant training, support and further monitoring to judge whether additional intervention is necessary.

There is telling evidence that this approach is leading to improvements in teaching. Lead practitioners in many areas are used effectively to develop colleagues by coaching, mentoring and leading training.

In lessons seen, the tasks set for groups and abilities by and large match students' needs with an increasing level of challenge. The quality of marking has improved and the revised system of giving feedback to students, which demands a response

and is then further checked on by the teacher, is leading to improved learning. Students spoken to said that marking and feedback had improved a lot since the inspection, especially in English, mathematics and science.

In the best learning seen, teachers are able to capture the students' imagination and stimulate significant interest to such a point where one student in mathematics said, 'Maths is really fun'. Nevertheless, some teachers' expectations remain too low and, consequently, their students are less enthused and less engaged in their learning.

The judgements made on teaching and learning during paired observations with senior staff show that they are accurate and the feedback given by them was reflective and highlighted clearly the strengths of teaching and where it could be better.

English data, book scrutiny and lesson observations show that teaching is improving. Better questioning makes students deepen their thinking. The best teaching was seen with middle ability students. The higher ability classes are still not challenged enough to achieve the highest levels.

Teaching in mathematics shows strengths; questioning that draws students on in their thinking is developing well. There remains some variation in the best use of marking to promote learning. Leaders of mathematics are right in their views that further work is needed to raise the expectations of more able students further, to improve fluency in basic numeracy and to use assessments to gauge more accurately where students are in their knowledge and understanding before they start a new topic or concept.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Attendance levels remain steady and the school is confident that they will achieve 94.3%. Leaders are rigorous in pursuing persistent absentees; 27 families have been taken to court as a result of this.

The number of behaviour incidences and exclusions continues to fall; this is a four-year trend.

The behaviour policy and associated sanctions are well known to students and during the inspection all staff observed were following the school's behaviour policy.

Students say that staff use the policy more consistently and, as a result, behaviour is improving. However, they did say that poor behaviour is common when supply teachers are teaching the lesson.

The Gateway is a good example of the efforts that the school has made to provide high quality provision for the students who find it difficult to access normal school provision.

Improvements in the literacy levels of students also support improved behaviour as more students are better equipped to access the curriculum and partake fully in lessons.

Inspectors found the school calm and purposeful. Students go promptly to lessons and are courteous and welcoming to visitors. There is very little litter and, on the whole, uniforms are worn with pride.

Behaviour for learning in lessons and family time is usually good. Where it is not, it is a result of weaker teaching due to lower expectations and activities that are not well matched to the students' needs.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The governors, NLE and School Achievement Partner all speak positively about the rapid changes that they have seen in all aspects of provision since the last monitoring inspection. They clearly know the school well and have a total commitment to making it the best possible for the benefit of the students. They have a thorough understanding of the performance of the school and continue to offer robust challenge to school leaders.

The headteacher and senior leadership group are now working effectively as a school improvement team. They are all totally focused on the areas that matter. Roles and responsibilities are clear, so it is much easier for the headteacher and governors to hold everyone to account for the impact and outcomes of their work. The team is playing to its strengths. It is clear that the team listens well to advice and takes quick, but sustainable actions and brings about rapid improvement. Examples include: the use of data to inform improvements in teaching; the much sharper and forensic use of lesson observations; and data and work scrutiny to provide professional development that targets individual needs.

Middle leaders receive high quality professional development and are more focused on the impact and outcomes of their work. There is compelling evidence that they are having a positive impact. The leadership of English, mathematics and science is effective. Leaders of core subjects undertake regular learning walks and provide support and challenge to their teams.

School leaders are now able both to challenge underperformance and identify excellence as the information that they hold on all aspects of teacher performance is accurate and current.

The recent change to the leadership of whole school literacy is having an impact and, as a result, standards in literacy are rising. The approach to developing literacy is now focused on Key Stage 3. Students are regularly assessed and the information is used diagnostically to give the right support to both groups and individual students. Year 8 middle ability boys who were underachieving were given time on

the Lexia programme; a computer-based scheme which they engaged well with. The impact of this on their literacy levels is impressive.

Family time is used well to promote reading, including time for paired reading. This initiative has resulted in rapid improvement in the reading ages of those students who take part. All departments have a literacy focus to promote specialist literacy and the results of this are seen in lessons observed and in students' books. There is a new initiative to link with feeder primary schools to promote common practice between Years 5, 6 and 7.

School self-evaluation is still at an early stage and the most recent self-evaluation form demonstrates that there is still a tendency to be overgenerous, to use historical data and predictions for the future, rather than using the most current data available. There still remains a culture of quality assurance of systems and processes, rather than forensic evaluation of their impact on students' progress and achievement.

Whole-school evaluation needs to be as rigorous as the peer reviews carried out in English and mathematics, identifying clear priorities to inform the next stages of school improvement.

The level of support and intervention in English and mathematics needs to be replicated in all curriculum areas, as there is some evidence that standards are not as high in some foundation subjects, when compared to the core. The students said that teaching, marking and feedback were better in English, mathematics and science than other areas.

The move to horizontal year groups has taken place and is allowing much closer monitoring of the progress of students' progress. Students report that they feel that family time is more productive because it is focused on their individual and year group needs. The leadership of each year group is well defined and there are clearly identified staff responsible for monitoring progress, behaviour and attendance.

The curriculum has been revised for September, giving more time to English and mathematics and the 100-minute lessons have been reduced to 50 minutes, with the provision of double lessons where appropriate, for example, physical education and extended writing.

The school is no longer prioritising Key Stage 4 and Year 11, but it has rightly focused on improvement across the whole school.

Although it is very clear that the school has now made significant steps on the journey to success, there is no room for complacency. There remains a lot to do in embedding new systems and evaluating impact. The use of data, although far more effective, could be developed further.

External support

External support, in particular the peer review in both English and mathematics, has been important in moving the school forward. External evaluation is detailed, accurate and the suggestions for improvement are clear and focused totally on the actions and strategies which will bring about sustained improvement on outcomes for students. Both the NLE and School Achievement Partner offer rigorous challenge and high quality support to the headteacher and senior leaders and have made a significant contribution to the improvements seen in this monitoring inspection.