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Mr Meagher
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Meagher

Special measures monitoring inspection of Failsworth School

Following my visit with Judith Straw and Clive Hurren, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 10 and 11 November 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 third 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal from special measures.

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

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. 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.

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer
Her Majesty's Inspector

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 third monitoring inspection on 10 to 11 November 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders and groups of pupils. Inspectors also met a representative from the local authority, members of Governing Body, the school's Achievement Partner and the Peer Review Co-ordinator.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection 14 teachers have left the school and 13 new teachers have been appointed. These include three teachers of science, three of English and two of mathematics.

The school is in discussions with the Department for Education regarding plans to move to academy status.

Outcomes for pupils

Although the overall judgement from this inspection is that leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal from special measures, their previous lack of urgency and overly-positive evaluation of the school's work has meant there has been insufficient time for actions to positively impact on pupil outcomes in 2015. As a consequence, the school's latest self-evaluation rightly judges outcomes to be inadequate.

Pupils arrive at the school in Year 7 with levels of attainment significantly above the national average and leave in Year 11 with attainment that is significantly below. In summer 2015 the proportion of pupils achieving five A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, continued a declining trend, remaining significantly below national averages and 10 percentage points behind the school's results in 2013.

The poor progress Year 11 pupils make from their starting points in English and mathematics did not improve in 2015. Levels of progress are well below expectations, national averages and the school's own predictions.

The gap between the attainment of boys and girls at GCSE has narrowed slightly but remains too wide, with boys at 12 percentage points behind girls. The gap between the attainment at GCSE of disadvantaged pupils and their peers widened, and the progress made by pupils who enter the school with high levels of attainment remains well below expectations.

Despite poor attainment and progress overall, some subjects show signs of improvement and in these subjects attainment is now above national averages.

These subjects include catering, citizenship, drama, French, information and communication technology, and music. It is also the case that in some subjects the gap between the levels of progress made by disadvantaged pupils and their peers has narrowed. However, the fact remains that attainment in approximately half of the subjects in the school, including English, mathematics and science, is below national figures.

The school has put in place a range of interventions in Year 7 to improve the low literacy and numeracy levels of disadvantaged boys and other underachieving pupils. School data indicate that this has resulted in higher reading ages and increased levels of progress in mathematics at Key Stage 3.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching and learning remains too variable. In the majority of lessons pupils did not make the levels of progress of which they are capable. This is because in some lessons the pace of learning is too slow, leading to boredom and disengagement. In too many lessons the expectations of what pupils, particularly the most able, can achieve is much too low. In other lessons the work is far too difficult for all but the most able to manage, resulting in confusion and disruptive behaviour. For some pupils, their progress is hindered by teachers limiting the extent to which they can explore topics or engage in subject-related activities.

Teachers have received training on making the best use of questioning and using their knowledge of pupils more effectively. Where teaching resulted in good learning the teachers did know their pupils well. They met their learning needs through interesting and engaging work and used questioning to challenge pupils' thinking and to deepen their knowledge and understanding. In these lessons pupils were enthusiastic learners and behaviour was exemplary.

Pupils told inspectors that the marking of their books has improved and this helps them to learn. When scrutinising pupils' books inspectors noted wide differences in the quality of their written work, suggesting that there is still much to be done to ensure that consistently high standards are set and maintained. Most teachers mark pupils' spelling, punctuation and grammar but despite this, some pupils ignore their teacher's comments and continue to make the same mistakes. Some teachers have high expectations of the quality of work and standards of presentation and others clearly do not. Where expectations are low the work in books is often untidy and incomplete, providing very little evidence of learning and progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' personal development and welfare are areas of strength. Robust systems for safeguarding pupils' wellbeing are in place both in the school and where pupils are taught on other sites. The curriculum ensures that pupils learn how to safeguard themselves and others as they encounter the risks and dangers of everyday life,

including when using technology and social media sites. Pupils also know they can turn to the school nurse and other welfare services for personal support and advice.

Pupils report that bullying and the use of offensive, prejudiced language is quite rare. They are confident in the school's systems to prevent bullying and to tackle it when it occurs. School records show a decrease in reported incidents of bullying over the past three years.

Attendance is tracked rigorously. A range of incentives and sanctions has supported a rise in attendance figures, which are now a little above national averages. School data indicate that punctuality to lessons has improved and this is supported by inspectors' observations.

Although pupils' personal development and welfare are strong, there is room for improvement in their attitude to learning in lessons. Pupils act in a calm and sociable manner around the school at the start and end of the day and during breaktimes. Most arrive to lessons ready and prepared to learn, settle quickly and conduct themselves well throughout. However, inspectors observed incidents of poor behaviour where teaching was inadequate. Pupils in Key Stage 3 who met with inspectors reported that some of their learning was hampered by the disruptive behaviour of others.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The previous section 5 inspection report identified the need for leaders and managers to have an accurate understanding of what data is telling them about pupil progress. However, predictions of outcomes have been inaccurate and over-generous by a significant margin for the third year running. Leaders have, for the most part, taken this on board and are beginning to have a more realistic grasp of data. Consequently they recognise that the school has much to do to improve outcomes, particularly in English and mathematics. Nevertheless, there remains a tendency to focus on the few examples of improving outcomes while downplaying where improvements are negligible or outcomes declining.

The most recent self-evaluation and the school improvement plan show that leadership overall has moved to a more accurate understanding of what needs to be done. It is for this reason that the judgement has been made that leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal from special measures.

Improvement planning is now well-considered, with appropriate actions, success criteria and monitoring arrangements. For example, rather than continuing with the previous unsuccessful policy of concentrating interventions and resources in Year 11, the school is now focused on improving teaching and learning across all year groups, to secure better and more sustainable outcomes.

Leaders and governors have put in place a more robust system for monitoring and evaluating teachers' work with strategies to address underperformance, although evidence of impact at this stage is limited. Significant actions have been taken to improve the capacity of middle leaders to carry out their roles effectively. They now have a better understanding of their accountability for the quality of teaching and learning. Systems are now in place to enable them to carry out their roles, but these changes have taken place too recently to have had a significant impact on either the quality of teaching or pupil outcomes.

Leaders are currently engaged in appropriate preparations for the school's transition to academy status.

External support

Much of the school's external support has come from the work of the Achievement Partner and Peer Reviewers independently commissioned by the local authority. Since the last monitoring inspection they have undertaken reviews of English, mathematics, science and languages. This has included joint lesson observations with middle leaders and support for departmental improvement plans. The impact of their work with middle leaders on pupil outcomes is not yet evident.