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Mr Kevin Reynolds
Executive Principal
North Durham Academy
High Street
Stanley
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Dear Mr Reynolds

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of North Durham Academy

Following my visit to your school on 13 December 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in May 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and the director of school, other senior leaders and a group of middle leaders. I met with the chair of the board of trustees, the chair of the local governing body and a trust director. I also met with a representative from the local authority.

I met with a group of Year 7 and Year 11 pupils, separately, to discuss their learning and their experiences at school. I observed, jointly with senior leaders, teaching in a range of classes and subjects. I scrutinised documents, including pupil progress information, pupils' work, senior leaders' evaluations of the school's work and attendance records. I analysed a range of governors' documentation, including recent minutes of meetings. The trust's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the previous inspection, seven new senior leaders have taken up post and the new directors of English and mathematics began in September 2017. Twenty members of staff left the school by 1 September 2017, however, all posts have been filled and, for the first time since the school opened in 2011, the English and mathematics departments are fully staffed.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You and other leaders continue to rigorously address the areas of weakness identified in the section 5 inspection. You and other directors continue to take decisive action in order to secure much-needed improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Inspection evidence indicates that such action is beginning to have a positive impact. As a result, teaching and pupils' outcomes are improving. For example, provisional 2017 outcomes demonstrate clear improvements in pupils' progress overall and for disadvantaged pupils. Nevertheless, leaders acknowledge that some teachers are more skilled than others at challenging pupils sufficiently so that their varying needs are met. Leaders also acknowledge that to improve the quality of teaching further, they must ensure that there is consistency across the school so that pupils consistently make good or better progress.

You have skilfully used your link with Consett Academy to share good practice. Effective systems of support are in place so that colleagues across both sites have opportunities to share ideas and to learn from each other. Leaders have also planned opportunities for subject areas across both schools to work together to cross-mark and moderate pupil assessments. As a consequence of this link, the quality of teaching and accuracy of pupil assessment information is improving at North Durham Academy.

Governors, trustees and the trust have embraced the challenge of new ways of working so that the school improves rapidly. Additional committees have been formed to provide an additional layer of support, challenge and monitoring of the work of leaders throughout the school. The 'Academy Scrutiny Group', for example, is providing robust challenge to the executive leadership team in order to evaluate the impact of leaders' actions that are set out in the school's improvement plan. The trust, governors and trustees are resolute in their determination to support the school's improvement journey, but also to ensure that change and improvement are sustainable.

Middle leaders are developing their expertise and they are using monitoring information more readily to inform how they will improve the quality of teaching in their subject areas. Middle leaders understand the important role they have to play in improving the quality of teaching in their subject areas, and also the importance of improving pupils' outcomes. As a group, they are aligned with the school's

priorities for improvement and, as a result, they use their departmental action plans wisely to steer improvements. They are clearly having an impact on effecting change.

You and other directors have secured the support of staff and there is a determination by all to improve the quality of teaching and experience of pupils. Pupils acknowledge the improvements in recent months and speak humbly about the care, guidance and support their teachers provide them. They are truly appreciative of all the efforts teachers make to help them. Pupils' confidence is evidently developing as they actively answer questions in class and take part in class discussions more readily. Pupils move about the school site calmly and orderly and they are well supervised by staff. Pupils say they enjoy coming to school and feel safe. The majority of parents also support these views.

You and other leaders are keeping a close eye on Year 11. You are determined to make sure that historic weaker teaching and staffing turbulence does not have a negative impact on their GCSE outcomes next summer. Much is being done to make sure that these pupils get additional help, support and guidance. For example, Year 11 pupils have access to a bespoke package of support in subjects they are not performing as well as they should in. Year 11 pupils say they are grateful for this support and they are confident they will achieve their very best in their examinations because of it. Nevertheless, leaders have not taken their eye off other year groups and because of this, pupils across the school are making, steadily, improved progress in a wider range of subjects than previously.

The local authority is providing effective, intensive support to improve teaching and learning throughout the school. Their involvement is providing timely, planned and effective support to the executive principal and the director of school in their journey of improving standards. A review of the science department, undertaken by Cardinal Hume Catholic School, has benefited leaders in planning for improvement in this key subject area.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium was undertaken in October 2017. The report is a detailed document, contextualised to the school and it provides leaders with clear recommendations. You and other leaders have used this report to prepare an action plan that focuses sharply on the key areas that need to be addressed in order to increase the impact of additional funding in improving the quality of teaching and attendance of disadvantaged pupils. The impact of such actions are at an early stage, although teachers' awareness for these pupils has increased through, for example, seating plans that clearly identify different groups of pupils.

Overall attendance remains slightly below the national average. Tutors are taking a more active role, for example through bespoke action plans for individual pupils, in monitoring the attendance of those pupils whose absence drops below 96%. Attendance for different groups and individual pupils is improving steadily because

of the actions taken. Attendance for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities has improved. This is because regular contact with parents has improved as a result of a sharper cycle of review meetings. This sharper focus on improving the attendance and reducing persistent absence of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is paying off.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the multi academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Darren Stewart
Her Majesty's Inspector