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Allie Denholm
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Dear Ms Denholm

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of South Shields School

Following my visit to your school on 16 May 2018, 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 October 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I held meetings with you and members of your senior leadership team. I also held discussions with representatives of the local authority and five governors, including the chair of the governing body. I met with a representative group of pupils and talked informally to some members of staff and other pupils as I walked around the school at social times and during lessons. I reviewed a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans, checks on the quality of teaching, assessment and attendance information and records of visits by the local authority. I evaluated the local authority statement of action. I also looked at the school's safeguarding work by scrutinising the single central record.

Context

Following the last inspection, the Department for Education issued an academy order. The governing body has made efforts to find a suitable academy sponsor.

However, these efforts have proved unsuccessful to date. At present, neither the governing body nor the local authority has identified any other potential academy sponsors. There have been no changes to the senior leadership team. Two teachers have left the school. The governing body has restructured to form a new committee structure, in order to tighten its work in monitoring the school's progress. The number of pupils on roll has remained stable.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Following the last inspection, you quickly put highly effective improvement planning in place, at both a whole-school and faculty level. Leaders are carefully evaluating the effect of their actions and sharing their findings with the governing body. As a result, leaders and managers, as well as governors, have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. This is ensuring that everyone is clear about their role and responsibilities and is ambitious for the future. Your plans for improvement are closely aligned to the areas of weakness identified in the previous inspection. They centre, very much, on improving the quality of teaching and level of attendance, in order to raise standards. Your plans include a range of realistic targets, which you intend to raise further to match national averages in the next round of improvement planning.

The school has continued to benefit from a sustained period of stable and settled leadership. Members of the senior leadership team have continued to take appropriate actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The training that has been provided for staff since the last inspection is helping to improve their skills. Staff have a better understanding of how to use assessment information to ensure that their lessons are challenging. Training has also ensured that staff now give more consideration, in their planning, to pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and pupils who are disadvantaged. Leaders have also worked hard to improve the reliability of assessment and use this information to track the progress of different groups of pupils carefully. Close analysis of tracking data is ensuring that pupils who have gaps in their knowledge receive extra teaching. Pupils told me that this extra teaching is helpful and builds their confidence.

You have sustained a rolling programme of checks on the performance of each faculty. This programme is helping to develop the skills of faculty leaders and to strengthen their roles in pushing forward improvements. However, you are well aware that some faculties are making slower progress. These faculties would benefit from more external support to strengthen leadership and accelerate the progress being made. Although the local authority has signposted you to some good practice in other schools, there is no well-coordinated external support in place to help weaker subject areas develop a better understanding of new GCSE requirements. This is hindering progress and not tackling the variation between different subjects rapidly enough.

You are managing the performance of each teacher effectively. Appraisal records show that each teacher has objectives for the year, closely linked to the progress of their pupils and to their teaching skills. Review meetings have been completed, and teachers are clear about whether they are on course to achieve their objectives. A small number of teachers are receiving extra support and challenge in order to meet their objectives.

The school's own assessment information indicates that a greater proportion of pupils in the current Year 11 are on track to attain level 4, or better, in English and mathematics than seen last year. Your tracking indicates that examination results this summer will be better for the most able pupils, those who have SEN and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils across a broad range of subjects. Data shows that improved levels of attainment are most secure in mathematics and in computing. In some other subjects, you recognise that pupils still have considerable gaps in their knowledge because of weaker teaching in the past. Your staff are continuing to provide teaching and revision classes for Year 11 pupils, now that GCSE examinations have begun.

In the last inspection, you were asked to undertake an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium, because outcomes for disadvantaged pupils were well below those of other pupils nationally. Your revised pupil premium strategy is published on the school website. It shows that the progress of disadvantaged pupils in each year group is being regularly checked and that additional resources directed at improving their attendance are having a positive effect. Changes made to the structure of the governors' committees are ensuring that they now, systematically, hold you and other leaders to account for the progress of disadvantaged pupils. Most importantly, teachers are now much more aware of how they can engage and challenge disadvantaged pupils more effectively in day-to-day lessons.

The last inspection highlighted the declining trend in the overall level of attendance, which, in 2017, was considerably worse than seen nationally. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils was of particular concern. Following the inspection, you recruited an attendance officer and have thought carefully about where to target your efforts. This year, to date, overall attendance has improved and the proportion of pupils who miss school regularly has reduced by over 3%. Although current attendance is better, it remains below the 2017 national average. Pleasingly, however, the pattern of attendance in recent weeks has shown steady improvement, indicating that current strategies may be winning hearts and minds.

Members of staff and most pupils reported that behaviour in the school is now much better than it used to be. Some younger pupils told me that they feel some teachers should manage distracting and disruptive behaviour more assertively. However, I saw no evidence of poor behaviour when I visited lessons in the English, mathematics, computing and art departments. I saw purposeful lessons, with pupils very much on task and settled. In some lessons visited, it was clear that teachers were implementing approaches covered in training to improve pupils'

speaking and listening and to strengthen their literacy skills.

The local authority is monitoring the school's progress, and a representative has made several visits to provide effective support and challenge. Some helpful financial assistance has been offered to maintain current staffing levels, and help has been provided to improve levels of attendance. However, the local authority statement of action does not set out how it will facilitate the school's speedy transition to an academy, or how it will support you to improve the curriculum in more weakly performing faculties.

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 plans are fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for South Tyneside. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector