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Michael Robson
Executive Principal
The Blyth Academy
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Dear Mr Robson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Blyth Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 5 July 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

The school was last inspected in May 2017.

Senior leaders and the trust are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection for the academy to become good.

The academy should take further action to:

- intensify actions to improve pupils' attendance
- develop the work of the inclusion team to support further vulnerable pupils and those at risk of exclusion
- continue to improve pupils' behaviour so that incidents of fixed-term exclusion are significantly reduced.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, your principal and the new senior leaders who were in the process of taking up their roles that week. I also met the chief

executive of the trust and the trust's director of safeguarding and governance. I talked to a number of senior leaders and subject directors, including those with responsibility for special educational needs and teaching and learning. I also spoke by telephone to the local authority designated officer for safeguarding. I held a meeting with three members of the governing body. The chair of the governing body later joined the meeting by telephone. I also met a group of pupils from across all key stages to discuss their learning and any changes they had identified since the last inspection. As part of the monitoring visit, I undertook a learning walk with the principal. I also looked at the work in pupils' books and evaluated the school's information on pupils' progress, attendance and rates of exclusion.

Context

Since the last inspection, there have been considerable changes to leadership. The trust appointed a new executive principal and principal to take on senior leadership responsibilities when the previous principal left the school in October 2017. A new associate executive principal and principal are in the process of assuming leadership responsibilities from July 2018. Several new appointments, including subject leaders, have been made in readiness for September 2018.

There have also been changes at trust level since the last inspection. A new chief executive has been appointed to the trust and has introduced some significant changes to the trust's scheme of delegation. The trust board now has direct responsibility for monitoring standards and for setting the strategic direction of the trust. The governing body provides additional oversight as an academy council, retaining elements of accountability at a community level.

Main findings

The improvements to pupils' outcomes that leaders had anticipated at the time of the last inspection did not materialise in summer 2017. Pupils' progress declined to significantly below national averages in English, mathematics, science and the humanities. This placed the school in the bottom 10% of schools nationally for these measures. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils were particularly weak. Leaders recognise that the journey to becoming a good school will now be much harder than expected, and from a considerably lower baseline.

New leaders from October 2017 faced an arduous challenge, but one that they were willing and able to tackle head on. A core tenet of leaders' work was the introduction of a new consequences system to create a sustained focus upon learning and to address more serious incidents of indiscipline. This strategy has resulted in an extremely high number of fixed-term exclusions. At the time of the inspection, there had been 2,257 incidences of fixed-term exclusion since September 2017. This equates to 2,431 days of lost learning time and is equivalent to every pupil in the school being excluded three times each. Almost a third of all pupils have experienced some form of exclusion. A significant proportion of

excluded pupils have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. In addition, seven pupils have been permanently excluded this year and eight families have chosen to home educate their children.

While these levels of exclusion are beginning to reduce, they remain high. There have been 541 fixed-term exclusions in May and June alone. Leaders have also been unsuccessful in securing improvements in attendance in the 13 months since the previous inspection. Over the year, attendance rates have been 89.7%, with persistent absence at 29.8%. These are significantly adrift from national averages. More recent figures for the last eight weeks are showing improvement. Senior leaders have plans in place for a new inclusion team from September 2018. The school is also commissioning additional support from the local authority to support pupils' attendance and welfare, including those who may be vulnerable to exclusion. While these actions are yet to bear fruit, trust and school leaders have a good handle on the issues they face and the urgent action that is needed.

In other areas of the school's work, leaders have secured much greater success. A sustained focus on teaching and learning is having a significant impact upon the learning culture of the school. In observation and in discussion with pupils, it was clear that consistent processes are in place. Teachers are ensuring that pupils engage with learning on entry to the classroom and staff regularly compel pupils to share their views and interact purposefully with their peers. These initiatives are developing pupils' language and communication skills, as well as their self-confidence. Teachers are also providing regular challenges to raise pupils' aspirations and to stretch the most able. While these initiatives may not yet be implemented with consistent effect, pupils recognise their value and the new focus upon learning.

The trust has worked effectively to build leadership capacity. Subject directors employed centrally by the trust have been deployed to support and challenge staff. These colleagues have added teaching capacity, by directly teaching groups of pupils themselves, and developed more consistent approaches to teaching through the introduction of common schemes of learning. This has developed subject expertise and leadership across the school. The trust has also introduced more rigorous systems for assuring the quality of pupils' work. Moderation events occur every half-term to ensure that staff have an accurate understanding of standards. This is also overcoming some of the highly inaccurate forecasting of pupils' outcomes that undermined improvement strategies in previous years.

Leaders are monitoring the effect of strategies to support pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities more assiduously. Progress is assessed at weekly review meetings and at additional meetings to check the effect of support for vulnerable pupils. Teaching staff are held much more accountable for the progress of the pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities in their classrooms. The trust is planning a full review of SEN provision in July 2018, ahead of the creation of a stronger inclusion team in September 2018, including the promotion of the special education needs coordinator to senior leader.

Whole-school strategies to enhance teaching and learning extend to the sixth form. Similar initiatives to inject pace and purpose into learning from the start of lessons are in place, while pupils are aware of heightened challenge. Year 11 pupils who are about to embark upon sixth-form study feel that they are receiving better information and guidance than those in Year 13. Both prospective and existing members of the sixth form are identifying a stronger learning culture and improving quality of teaching. In 2017, pupils studying A levels made progress in line with their peers nationally. However, retention rates remain below those seen nationally and the numbers of pupils on roll in the sixth form has fallen in recent years.

In discussion, pupils said that they felt safe in school. They believed that behaviour was much better due to a higher staff presence in lessons and around the site and as a new behaviour system was being used more consistently. In meetings with pupils, they all felt confident that they would have an adult they could talk to if they had any concerns over their welfare. Sixth-form pupils said that this was a real strength of the school. These strengths in the safeguarding culture at the school must be balanced against the high numbers of days lost to fixed-term exclusions. While leaders' actions are leading to a cultural change in behaviour and educational aspiration, this has come at a cost. There is now less time for the school to get to good overall, and it is from a far lower starting point than originally expected.

External support

Since the appointment of the new chief executive, the trust has intensified support for the school. A new executive principal and principal were appointed to improve standards of behaviour and lead improvements in teaching and learning. Subject directors have added teaching capacity and developed subject expertise and leadership.

In addition to this considerable investment of staff, the trust has also provided significant financial support, including the provision of one-to-one tuition, and honoured existing commitments for alternative provision for pupils. This support is leading to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and the creation of a much stronger learning ethos at the school. Pupils are developing higher aspirations and there is evidence from moderated assessments that pupils' attainment is increasing.

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

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector