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Mrs Judith Schafer
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Schafer

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Solway Community Technology College

Following my visit to your school on 22 February 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 school 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.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- raise pupils' achievement in GCSE English, mathematics and science
- ensure that more pupils study a range of academic qualifications that meet their needs and enable them to fulfil their potential
- build on the improvements made to teaching so that pupils make the progress of which they are capable by the end of key stage 4
- ensure that the effectiveness of the school's use of the pupil premium funding is evaluated with greater rigour

- ensure that self-evaluation and the school improvement plan draw sufficiently on quantifiable measures of success that are linked to outcomes for pupils.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with the headteacher, other senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and support staff, members of the governing body, representatives of Cumbria local authority and pupils. During these meetings I discussed the impact of actions taken to raise standards since the last inspection. I also visited lessons in science, mathematics, physical education, history and English and took the opportunity to speak with pupils and look at the standard of work in their books. I evaluated the school improvement plan and the pupil premium strategy. I reviewed a range of school documentation relating to school improvement, including the school's records of observation of teaching and learning.

Context

Since the previous inspection, six new teaching staff have joined the school. There have been a number of changes to the leadership structure of the school. The headteacher became executive headteacher of Beacon Hill Community School in April 2017. The post of deputy headteacher was created to increase leadership capacity and this post was filled substantively from September 2017. Of the three heads of faculty posts, one is a temporary promotion to cover maternity leave, one is a new appointment and the third has recently returned from maternity leave but has been head of faculty since 2015. A new chair and vice-chair of the governing body have been appointed. There are currently three vacancies on the governing body.

Main findings

Leaders and managers have been resolute in maintaining the momentum of improvement since the last inspection. Staff morale is high and the recruitment of new staff has increased further the commitment to make this a good school. Middle leadership in particular has strengthened and a focus on teaching and learning has become the backbone of the school. The strengths identified in key stage 3 at the last inspection have been sustained. Improvements at key stage 4 are less evident and strategies to raise achievement for older pupils have not had enough time to make sufficient difference to their outcomes. Examination results for key stage 4 in 2017 were a huge disappointment to the school and indicate the extent of the challenge for the school ahead of its next inspection.

In 2017 the school's overall measure for pupils' progress by the end of Year 11 was in the bottom 2% of schools nationally. Progress measures for English, mathematics and science were all significantly lower than average. Year 11 pupils achieved on average two grades lower than pupils nationally in English and one grade lower in mathematics. Overall, boys made slower progress than girls. Pupils who started Year

7 with broadly average levels of prior attainment, and who represent almost half of the cohort, also fared particularly badly in terms of overall progress. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils were similarly poor. Pass rates in GCSE Spanish were above average and pupils made good progress in this subject.

Outcomes for pupils in 2017 are testament to the long legacy of pupils' underachievement and historically weak teaching. Another reason for pupils' poor results can be explained by the way the school's key stage 4 curriculum was organised. Too few pupils undertook eight or more GCSE examinations, even though their level of prior attainment would suggest they would have been capable of sitting more. Only three pupils completed Year 11 having studied a broad range of academic subjects that included English, mathematics, science, a modern foreign language and a humanities subject. Not enough pupils had the opportunity to study both English language and English literature. Too few boys chose to study a modern language through to GCSE level.

The school has recognised these structural weaknesses in its key stage 4 curriculum and has taken decisive action to address them. Following a review of the curriculum in summer 2017, changes have been made to option choices. All key stage 4 pupils are currently studying English literature. Pupils currently choosing their GCSE options have access to a broader and appropriately challenging combination of subjects. The school has already introduced a BTEC National Diploma in physical education, which is highly popular. This course has been particularly successful in engaging the interests and enthusiasm of boys. Collaboration with Beacon Hill Community School is also helping to widen the choice of subjects offered at key stage 4.

The headteacher has been clear to staff about the need to secure rapid improvement in key stage 4 outcomes and she has won their support. A wide range of interventions are currently taking place to support Year 11 pupils in filling gaps in their knowledge and understanding in preparation for the GCSE examinations in 2018. This, however, is not to the detriment of pupils in key stage 3, where the school continues to innovate to ensure that pupils get off to the very best start. One example of this is the work being undertaken with primary schools to secure a smooth transition from primary to secondary school.

Appropriate plans are in place to tackle all the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Leaders at all levels have a clear view of the role they have to play in delivering the school improvement plan. However, actions laid out in the plan lack quantifiable measures against which leaders and governors can evaluate, with precision, the impact of their actions on improving outcomes for pupils. The school's self-evaluation similarly fails to draw sufficiently on quantifiable success criteria. Consequently, leaders and governors have an overly optimistic view of the school's overall effectiveness. In addition, the school's approach to evaluating its effectiveness in the use of its pupil premium funding lacks rigour and depth. Therefore, actions to diminish the difference between disadvantaged pupils and their

peers are too generic and generally roll over from one year to the next, with little adaptation or revision. These weaknesses have gone unchallenged in spite of regular external monitoring by local authority officers.

The quality of teaching has undoubtedly improved. The management of teaching has improved considerably. Senior and middle leaders are diligent in following up on their findings from their observations of teaching and the regular scrutiny of pupils' workbooks. Teachers actively seek out opportunities to improve their teaching by sharing good practice from both within the school and beyond. The atmosphere in lessons is calm and learning is purposeful. Strong features are teachers' good subject knowledge and their positive relationships with pupils. Questioning is used effectively to challenge pupils to think more deeply about their responses. Similarly, there has been a strong focus on planning tasks and activities that challenge all groups of pupils, especially the most able. As a consequence, the school's information on current pupils' progress indicates a more positive picture for disadvantaged pupils, the most able and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities.

The development of pupils' literacy is given a much higher priority across all subjects. Work in pupils' books demonstrates that they are given more opportunities in class to write longer pieces of work. More thought has been given to class texts so that they might capture the interest and imagination of boys in particular. Teachers take every opportunity to promote good practice in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Another positive outcome is that the school library now reports an increased usage of its facilities.

The school has been highly successful in engaging boys in their learning. Some of the recent appointments of male staff have provided very positive role models for some boys who have not always been able to see the positive side of coming to school. However, staff have won their hearts and minds by initiating a wide range of extra-curricular activities, including competitive sports and clubs that make coming to school more fun. This has also impacted positively on their academic progress.

The boys I spoke with talked with pride about their involvement in team sports. Members of the bike club who recently achieved the coast-to-coast bike ride are eagerly awaiting a repeat run from Pisa to Rome this year. They spoke with equal confidence about their target grades, the progress they are making and how well teachers help them to improve their work. The school uses social media appropriately to celebrate pupils' achievements, while, at the same time, communicating the homework that has been set each day. The school's tracking data indicates that in key stage 3 boys achieve as well as, and in some cases better than, girls.

The school's curriculum for careers education is much improved and is similarly impacting on pupils' motivation and behaviour in a positive way. A well-coordinated timetable of events and activities has raised aspirations by helping pupils to see the

wider opportunities ahead of them. As a result, pupils understand the need to work hard and get the qualifications they need to progress. Boys, in particular, have a very clear sight of their career goals.

Published data on pupils' destinations when they leave school is highly inaccurate. This undermines the true picture, which is one of hard work and success on the part the school in enabling pupils to progress on to further education, training or employment. The local authority should address this as a matter of urgency with the contracted careers service that processes this information.

The consequence of all these improvements can be seen in both higher attendance and improved behaviour. Overall attendance was well below the national rate in 2017. As a result of more timely intervention, assiduous monitoring and collaboration with other support agencies attendance in the academic year to date has improved markedly compared to the same period in 2017. Acknowledgement also needs to be given to the many more parents who now attend parents' evenings and engage with the school to find a positive resolution if their child fails to attend regularly. The school is close to meeting its overall attendance target of 95%. The attendance of boys and disadvantaged pupils has improved by well over 3% in the current academic year. Similarly, the rate of persistent absence has halved compared to the same period in 2017 and is closer to the national rate.

Since the last inspection the school has revised its policy for managing behaviour. Pupils say that their learning is disrupted far less frequently in lessons because teachers are far more effective in applying the policy. They say that sanctions are fair and well understood, but equally they appreciate the rewards that are now in place to reward good behaviour. This is borne out by the school's success in reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions since September 2017.

External support

The school has become more outward looking and leaders and governors have actively sought out opportunities to collaborate with, and draw on, good practice from other schools. Subject leaders have developed strong links with specialists from other schools to share ideas and calibrate their marking and assessments.

The local authority has also brokered some additional support for the school, for example the opportunity for staff to visit a specialist leader of education in another school to share resources for teaching English. Funding has been provided to deliver masterclasses in English to current year 11 pupils. Local authority advisers have also delivered training events to support improvement in teaching. In addition, the local authority has funded some innovative work with primary schools in the area.

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

Yours sincerely

Vincent Ashworth
Her Majesty's Inspector