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3 July 2014

Mr R Hewitt
Headteacher
West Hill School
Thompson Cross
Stalybridge
Cheshire
SK15 1LX

Dear Mr Hewitt

Special measures monitoring inspection of West Hill School

Following my visit with Mark Williams, Her Majesty's Inspector and Tony Price, Additional Inspector, to your academy on 1 and 2 July 2014, 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013. 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:

The academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers, but I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint them in the mathematics department.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website.
I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Executive Director for Tameside.

Yours sincerely

Susan Wareing

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching by eradicating teaching that is inadequate or requires improvement in order to ensure all students achieve well in all subjects and particularly in mathematics and throughout Key Stage 3 by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students can achieve
 - ensuring all teachers use assessment information to plan in advance learning activities that provide suitable challenge through setting tasks that enable students to make at least good progress
 - increasing the opportunities students have to explain their thinking
 - marking students' work more consistently so that students receive clear guidance for improvement, and making certain that all students follow this advice
 - improving the quality of questioning to help students think more deeply and understand more fully
 - further improving students' literacy skills by expecting them to write more lengthy responses
 - setting good quality homework more frequently
 - ensuring the best practice of some teaching assistants is adopted by all, in finding a good balance between supporting students and letting them work things out for themselves.

- Improve the effectiveness of leaders, managers and governors by:
 - more accurately evaluating the impact of their own work and the work of teachers on improving students' achievement
 - ensuring these evaluations and subsequent planning ensure further, and more rapid, improvement
 - more rigorously holding themselves and others to account for the quality of their work
 - undertaking an external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the academy's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this and other aspects of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 1 and 2 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and held meetings with members of the academy's senior leadership team, three members of the governing body and two representatives of the local authority. Discussions also took place with a number of subject leaders and other members of staff; teaching and learning were directly observed in 16 lessons. Inspectors talked with students about their work and views of the academy and a range of students' work was considered. The lead inspector discussed behaviour and safety around the academy with a randomly selected group of students in Years 7 to 11. As no Key Stage 4 classes could be observed during this monitoring inspection because of GCSE and internal examinations, I also met a small group of Year 10 students to discuss their views about the academy.

Inspectors checked aspects of the academy's arrangements for safeguarding and information relating to students' attendance.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in April 2014, there have been no staffing changes.

Achievement of students at the academy

The latest information from the academy's new, more accurate systems for tracking students' attainment indicates a likely rise in the proportion of current Year 11 students achieving five good GCSE grades, including English and mathematics. Rates of expected progress are also showing improvement in both these subjects. The proportion of students making more than expected progress is also rising in mathematics, but not in English.

Achievement gaps are narrowing in English and mathematics for those students supported by the pupil premium, additional government funding. Leaders recognise that there is more work to be done to ensure that all students who have a disability or special educational needs and the most able students achieve as well as they can.

The academy's own, sharper, information about the progress of pupils in Key Stage 3 also paints an improving picture.

Inspectors confirm leaders' views that students' learning and progress, while improving, vary across subjects and teachers. Most students respond well when

expectations are high and they are required to take more responsibility for their learning. For example, in geography and science lessons, students were able to think for themselves and formulate their own questions, thereby increasing their knowledge and understanding. In such cases, students' levels of enjoyment and motivation fostered good quality learning. If students are struggling with their work because of gaps in their basic literacy or numeracy skills, their interest sometimes wanes and progress is slower.

The quality of teaching

Teaching continues to improve so that students' learning is getting better. Leaders' evaluations of teaching are increasingly accurate in identifying strengths and what needs to be improved. Stronger aspects of teaching include:

- an appropriate level of challenge that makes students think more deeply about what they are learning; this is the result of more skilful questioning, by teachers and their assistants, to probe students' knowledge and understanding
- a wide range of teaching strategies that engage and motivate students to learn
- frequent checks of students' progress in learning
- teachers who have excellent knowledge of the expected progression in learning within their subject
- regular feedback to students through good quality marking that gives clear and precise guidance on their strengths and targets for improvement and time for students to respond
- making increasingly better use of homework to help students learn more effectively
- increasingly high expectations of what students of all ability groups are capable of achieving. This is because teachers are using data more effectively than in the past
- ensuring that gaps in students' basic literacy and mathematics skills are remedied before planning tasks that stretch students' learning further.

These features are leading to better rates of progress in students' learning.

There are inconsistencies within and across subjects. While marking has improved, for example, through the 'even better if' system, the targets for students to improve their work are not always followed through. In addition, opportunities for students to respond to teachers' guidance through 'my response is' are not always taken. This sometimes limits opportunities for students' understanding to be widened and deepened. Marking does not always pick up inaccuracies in mathematics, spelling and grammar nor the use of subject-specific terms, for example.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour was not a concern in the last full inspection or in the last monitoring inspection. However, it is important to note the unfailing courtesy, maturity and highly positive attitudes to learning shown by students during this monitoring inspection. Students take pride in their academy and in their appearance and say that they feel safe in the academy. They listen well to each other and to their teachers in their lessons. They clearly relish opportunities to develop leadership qualities, for example, as monitors and prefects. They understand the academy's expectations and appreciate the sanctions that are in place in the event that these are not met. The rigorous systems in place to monitor attendance and behaviour have brought about improvements in attendance rates and a reduction in the use of exclusions.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy improvement plan has been improved since the last monitoring inspection and now has a clear view of necessary actions to drive improvement up to the stated deadline adopted by the academy for becoming good by December 2015.

Leaders and governors are working urgently to move the academy forward as systems and expectations are beginning to become established across the academy. The leader of mathematics, for example, appointed just before the last inspection, has a clear view of the need to improve consistency in the quality of teaching and marking and, as a result, students' learning in this subject.

Leaders' evaluations of teaching are becoming more and more accurate in identifying strengths and what needs to be improved. Leaders have rightly refocused their monitoring of teaching to capture features over time that indicate better quality in teaching and learning. Where support is needed to improve teaching quality, it is provided quickly and is effective in improving the teacher's practice. This sharp emphasis on improving the quality of teaching ensures the staff's awareness that their performance is linked strongly to the progress made by the students they teach.

Leaders and governors have been decisive in making teaching and leadership appointments that show the capacity to strengthen departments, but some of the teachers and leaders appointed need more time for their work to show impact on students' outcomes.

The governing body continues to strengthen its skills in holding the academy to account more effectively. Governors check regularly on the academy's work and records of their meetings show their determination and confidence in questioning leaders and staff. Governors now have a much clearer understanding of the

information provided on students' attainment and progress and are very actively involved in securing the further improvement of the academy.

External support

The academy is drawing well on local teaching alliances to allow staff to see outstanding practice, and has commissioned from the local authority a full review of the English department. This is beginning to extend the department's range of teaching strategies to engage students more deeply in their learning.

Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the academy and leaders are keen to develop further its engagement with parents and students, ensuring that their voices are heard and views taken into account.