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Mr Steve Gibson
Principal
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Dear Mr Gibson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to NCEA Duke's Secondary School

Following my visit to your academy on 17 December 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 three successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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

The academy should take further action to:

- continue to embed the recently introduced strategies to improve pupils' attendance
- maintain and extend the improving standards of pupils' behaviour
- further increase the consistency of good teaching, learning and assessment.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, the interim chief executive officer of the trust and governors, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I met a group of subject leaders and other leaders responsible for the additional funding for the pupil premium, attendance and behaviour, special

educational needs and literacy. I met a group of pupils from Years 7 to 12. The school improvement plan and leaders' self-evaluation were evaluated. I undertook other activities, including visiting lessons, where I spoke with pupils about their work and looked at their books. I scrutinised the books of pupils from a range of subjects and years as part of a work scrutiny. I considered numerous school documents, including bullying logs and records of behaviour; attendance records and analysis; and information about the progress of pupils currently in the school. I also evaluated minutes of governors' meetings. I spoke on the telephone with a representative of the diocese who has been working with the school.

Context

Since the previous inspection in November 2017, there has been substantial change at the school. Trust leaders made the decision to change the status of the school from a through-school for children, pupils and students aged 2 to 19, to an 11 to 19 secondary school. These changes took place in July 2018. The executive director at the time of the previous inspection left the role and the trust in February 2018. Other senior officers at the trust also left. You were appointed as substantive principal as of March 2018.

Main findings

Supported by the interim chief executive officer of the trust, you have quickly taken action to begin the process of improving the quality and effectiveness of leadership at the school. You have written a school improvement plan which is fit for purpose, as it sets out the core priorities for action, who is responsible for each action, appropriate milestones for checking progress along the way and how the effect of the plan will be evaluated. Crucially, other senior leaders' plans, such as for attendance, behaviour and the use of additional funding for the pupil premium, are knitted together with the overall school plan. Additionally, the work of middle leaders for the improvement of teaching, for literacy and for special educational needs is closely aligned with the overarching school plan. This means that leaders at all levels are now working in a coordinated manner, where expertise is shared and everyone is heading in the same direction.

You have introduced a new approach to teaching, learning and assessment. As one leader said, 'We can't keep doing the same things, because we'll keep getting the same results.' This has led to the development and introduction of your 'DNA' approach to teaching, with a renewed focus on matching work to pupils' needs and enabling pupils to be more actively engaged in their learning. Although there is still an element of inconsistency in its application across subjects, it has led to what several leaders called a 'reinvigorated' quality of teaching. Evidence from lesson observations and work scrutiny suggests that teachers are becoming more effective in planning how they can stretch and challenge pupils to aim higher.

Pupils spoken to during my visit could certainly recognise the changes that have taken place in the classrooms. They told me, for example, that they are regularly challenged to be 'critical thinkers' about tough examination questions, so that they can gain higher marks. Typically, they feel that the work set by their teachers is appropriately demanding and that they can't coast along any more. Teachers make effective use of questions to stretch pupils further in their learning. Teachers also make frequent reference to demanding subject-specific vocabulary and challenge pupils to use a wider, more engaging vocabulary in their writing.

Since the previous inspection, you have acted to make the improvement of pupils' literacy a priority. You have created a small team of leaders to address this area for improvement. While there is still work to do to ensure consistency of practice, across years and subjects, there is evidence that pupils' basic spelling, punctuation and grammar are regularly checked and corrected by teachers. Leaders have identified those pupils who require additional help with their literacy and have put a number of support strategies in place. Leaders' information about the effectiveness of these interventions indicates that targeted pupils' reading ability, for example, has improved markedly compared to national standardised scores in the tests used by the school.

You have also taken steps to improve pupils' attendance and to reduce the number of pupils who are persistently absent. In September 2018, you changed the structure of the leadership of attendance and behaviour. This led to the creation of a new strategy for improving attendance, linked to the trust's re-structuring of its provision for attendance. At the time of this monitoring visit, it was too early to see any evidence of sustained, substantial improvements in pupils' attendance. However, there are early signs that for identified pupils with particularly high levels of absence, their attendance has improved as a direct consequence of leaders' actions.

During the previous academic year, leaders substantially increased the use of permanent and fixed-term exclusion. This was as a result of the trust leaders' and school senior leaders' decision to take a stand against repeated, persistent defiance of the school's authority. The use of permanent exclusion spiked in November 2017, but has since reduced markedly. Staff and pupils told me that behaviour has improved since the previous inspection, partly as the result of the use of exclusion and partly because of your introduction of a revised behaviour policy. Leaders' information about behaviour shows a reduction in the number of poor behaviour incidents since the introduction of the revised policy. Pupils say that teachers are more consistent in their application of the behaviour policy than previously. While pupils recognise that behaviour has improved, a few think that it could improve further.

External support

Leaders are drawing effectively on the support of the interim chief executive officer of the trust, who also fulfils a support and challenge function through his role as a

national leader for education. Leaders at different levels are benefiting from his experience and guidance, particularly in their growing ability to work in a more joined-up way. Leaders are also making effective use of the support from a diocesan education officer, who is working closely with leaders to develop further the consistency of teaching.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector