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James Wilson
Principal
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Dear Mr Wilson,

Special measures monitoring inspection of Waterhead Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 24 and 25 September 2024, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2022.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key judgements, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents and carers any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, Paula Crawley, Ofsted Inspector (OI), Fiona Burke-Jackson, (OI) and I discussed with you, the executive principal, the interim chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, other senior leaders, staff, trustees, members of the local academy board (LAB) and a representative of the local authority the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also visited lessons, met with subject leaders and staff, reviewed pupils' work, spoke to pupils, observed behaviour at social times and on the corridors, spoke to representatives of the trustees and LAB and reviewed a range of documentation. We have considered all of this in coming to our judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to no longer be judged as requiring special measures.

HMCI is of the opinion that the school may appoint early career teachers.

The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures.

The school has begun the process of being re-brokered into a new trust. The current trust leaders are working collaboratively with the new trust to ensure a smooth transition. Since the previous inspection, five trustees, including a new chair of trustees, have been appointed. There have been three new governors appointed to the LAB. There has been a restructuring of the senior leadership team.

The school has continued to act swiftly to make improvements. Although leaders have a realistic understanding of the progress that has been made thus far, the school's evaluation of the impact of its actions, particularly on the quality of education that pupils receive, could be sharpened. That said, refined improvement plans appropriately set out the next areas that need to be tackled.

Leaders have been successful in shifting the culture at the school. High expectations for behaviour are embedded. Staff no longer turn a blind eye to poor behaviour. They have the confidence to tackle it because they know that they are supported by leaders. Older pupils reflect on, and appreciate, the positive changes around pupils' behaviour. Leaders have turned their attention now to shaping pupils' attitudes to learning so that pupils are more engaged in their learning.

Pupils' day-to-day experience of school has been improved. They benefit from the calm atmosphere in the building. Pupils are no longer exposed to derogatory language. The school reinforces its expectations of behaviour and also teaches pupils about how they should behave, especially towards one another.

Raising pupils' attendance has been, and continues to be, a priority. There have been some gains in this area with a significant improvement in attendance rates. Nevertheless, there are still too many pupils who do not attend school as regularly as they should.

The school has used support, including from other schools in the trust, to finalise its curriculum thinking. The curriculum is now embedded and teachers know what they need to teach and when they need to teach it. Alongside this, the successful recruitment of subject specialists and an ongoing programme of professional development has improved teachers' subject knowledge. Even so, successful implementation of the curriculum is lagging behind. While the 'five-phase lesson' is used consistently across the school, there is a variability in how well each of the phases are used. At times, the activities that are chosen for pupils are not suitable. The quality of work in some pupils' books does not reflect the school's high expectations. In some subjects, pupils' learning is not building securely over time. In some lessons, pupils' progress is hindered because teachers do not check sufficiently well whether pupils have understood before moving on to new learning.

This results in misconceptions not being rectified and gaps in knowledge developing. There are still too many pupils who are underachieving.

Actions taken to address the gaps in reading knowledge of some key stage 4 pupils have not been sufficiently urgent. Those pupils have not had sufficient exposure to the school's reading curriculum to improve their reading fluency and confidence. They are not benefitting from the same approaches that have been used to improve the reading knowledge of key stage 3 pupils. As yet, the school does not have clear oversight of the effectiveness and impact of the strategies that have been deployed. It is, however, further along in its journey to promote a love of reading, than at the previous monitoring visit. Pupils are exposed to a wide variety of texts and genres. They read more frequently than they did before.

There are now clearer processes in place for identifying pupils' additional needs. There have been improvements in how this information is communicated with staff. However, the extent to which staff use this information to inform their teaching is less clear. For example, in lesson visits, there was little evidence of learning being adapted effectively. The school is acutely aware that pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) do not achieve as well as they should. They are taking steps to address this. For example, a new leader with responsibility for SEND has been appointed.

Staff have confidence in the leaders and continue to have confidence amidst the upcoming re-brokering. They recognise the massive positive changes that have already taken place within the school. Staff are on board with the school's ambitious vision but, for some, that has not fully translated into high expectations around pupils' achievement.

Governance of the school has improved. Governors and trustees provide high levels of challenge to the school. They have a clear and accurate understanding of the areas where the school has improved and of what still needs to be done.

As time has gone on, the school has been more judicious in its use of external support. It has used this support well to validate its actions. This has helped to provide a firm understanding of where there are inconsistencies that need to be addressed.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the CEO of the South Pennines Academies Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Oldham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Jones
His Majesty's Inspector