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Mr Christopher Maughan
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Maughan

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Tanfield School,
Specialist College of Science and Engineering**

Following my visit to your school on 9 June 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the 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 visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

The school should take further action to:

- carefully evaluate actions for improving attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and for improving the quality of teaching and learning
- develop the school's approach to improving literacy, so that spelling, punctuation and grammar are a priority across all subject areas
- ensure that the quality of teaching is as rigorous at key stage 3 as it is at key stage 4 by checking that challenge and support are appropriate for pupils of all abilities and high expectations are clearly modelled.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior and middle leaders, the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. The school action plan was evaluated. The inspector observed learning and scrutinised work in books alongside senior leaders. The inspector also spoke informally to pupils during lessons and at breaktime. A number of documents and policies were evaluated, including minutes of governors' meetings, records of meetings with the local authority, the child protection policy and the school attendance policy.

Context

Since the previous inspection, governors have successfully recruited a new headteacher to start at the end of June 2017. A number of staff have also been appointed, including three new teachers of English, a geography teacher, an art teacher and an inclusion worker. A special educational needs coordinator has been appointed internally.

Main findings

The collective efforts of senior leaders, governors, the local authority and middle leaders have produced appropriate action plans for school improvement. You are implementing these actions and they are beginning to show signs of improving progress for pupils and better quality teaching. However, there is further work to do to ensure that you evaluate actions continuously for their impact on school improvement.

Teaching and learning are an improving picture. Examples of extended writing are evident across a number of different subject areas, but are not yet consistent in all subject areas. The work that you are doing to train staff is beginning to improve teaching. Boys' work is improving and their work is of better quality when compared with work before the previous inspection. In lessons, teachers ensure that they challenge boys with questions and further challenge them to extend their answers and deepen their thinking. However, the quality of challenge and support is not as rigorous at key stage 3 as it is at key stage 4. The 'pink box' approach that you are implementing to help pupils further develop their knowledge and skills is starting to improve progress and is consistent across the curriculum.

Leaders in charge of teaching and learning are implementing training for all staff to improve the quality of their teaching and pupils' learning, for example on strategies to improve the progress of boys. This is very recent and therefore too soon to see the full impact on pupils' progress, although initial progress information is positive.

You are trialling different strategies to ensure that boys take an interest in their learning. An example of this is league tables in English. Boys are keen to take part

and enjoy the competitive element, which is ensuring that they are working harder to secure a strong position in the league table. Extra-curricular opportunities are helping to improve boys' attendance. For example, there are a number of different clubs for pupils to explore different genres of music, which boys enjoy attending.

Senior leaders recognise that literacy is a barrier to learning for some pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils. Further work is required to ensure that teachers have a consistent approach to improving literacy, since too often teachers do not pick up spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

Pupils are able to talk about their targets. Pupils know that they have an aspirational target and a base target. Most pupils are also able to say how they are currently achieving and what they need to do to improve their work.

Following an intensive review of attendance alongside the local authority, leaders now have an accurate figure for pupils' attendance. While attendance is lower than the national average, new strategies and procedures are beginning to improve attendance. Leaders act sooner when attendance begins to fall and work intensively on an individual basis with pupils who need additional help and support to improve their attendance. There are some success stories because leaders support pupils on a case-by-case basis with strategies that are appropriate to their needs. The appointment of an inclusion worker is bringing additional strength to the team and allowing a proactive response to pupils' needs rather than the previous reactive response.

Middle leadership is improving. Through appropriate support and opportunities for development, middle leaders have created their own departmental transformation plans. Middle leaders present these plans to governors, who ensure that they have appropriate actions for improvement and that middle leaders are implementing them. Middle leaders have a greater focus on pupils' progress. Using pupils' progress information alongside additional monitoring, they work with their departments to tackle areas of underperformance. Through this, pupils are receiving earlier help and support, which is enabling them to catch up if they fall behind in their learning.

Governors are knowledgeable about the school's strengths and priorities for development. Governors are aware of the outcomes of regular checks on the quality of teaching and learning and the progress pupils make. Governors have links with subject departments and most have had an initial meeting to find out about the department. Governors are now aware of what is happening at a deeper level and are able to challenge middle and senior leaders to improve. They recognise that there is further work to do to ensure that leaders at all levels are evaluating the success of their actions against the impact on pupils' progress.

External support

School leaders work with local authority advisers on a regular basis. They have carried out reviews on attendance and subject areas such as geography, history and science. The result is that policies that are more robust are in place for tackling attendance earlier, for example if it drops below 96%. Subject reviews have led to better quality teaching and learning, for example in geography, where the number of pupils opting to study it for GCSE has doubled from last year, and in-school monitoring is showing that pupils are more focused and making more progress in geography.

School leaders are also working with other schools, for example with St Bede's School in Lanchester to share good practice. This is strengthening the quality of schemes of work as leaders develop a five-year curriculum plan, and providing support for middle leaders with standardisation and moderation.

An external review of governance is underway, with the fourth and final stage still to take place. Governors are ensuring that they are asking challenging questions and that the outcomes and action points are carefully recorded and checked for impact at the next meeting.

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

Yours sincerely

Debbie Redshaw
Her Majesty's Inspector