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Stephen Cooke
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Dear Mr Cooke

Requires improvement monitoring inspection of Unity Academy Blackpool

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 29 November, 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 took place because the school was judged to require improvement at its previous graded (section 5) inspection.

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

During the inspection, I discussed with you, other school leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO), other staff and governors 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. I also completed visits to lessons, met with some pupils and scrutinised their work, reviewed documentation and spoke with a representative of the local authority. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- complete its curriculum thinking so that pupils are able to study for a broader range of qualifications that meet their needs and interests, and

- ensure that teachers make effective use of the newly introduced assessment strategies to identify and address gaps in pupils' knowledge.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, there have been several new appointments to the board of trustees. The trust's scheme of delegation has been amended. There has also been a reorganisation of roles and responsibilities in the school senior leadership team.

The school is taking appropriate action to remedy the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. It has reviewed the effectiveness of the curriculum and started to address the weaknesses in the quality of education that pupils are receiving. The curriculum across all key stages, including the early years, is broader and more balanced. It meets the requirements of the national curriculum. For example, all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), now have more time to study humanities subjects at key stage 3. However, the school is still finalising changes to the overall design of the curriculum. Some pupils do not currently access qualifications that best meet their needs and interests at key stage 4.

In most subjects, the school has acted swiftly to identify the most important knowledge that pupils should learn from the early years through to Year 11. This is providing greater clarity for teachers, so that they now know what pupils are expected to learn in each subject and key stage.

With the support of the trust, the school has ensured that teachers have received the training that they need to deliver the curriculums well. As a result, pupils are beginning to learn more successfully than they did in the past. Even so, these changes did not make a difference to those pupils who left Year 11 in 2023. The unvalidated published examination results show that the progress and attainment of these pupils was well below the national averages. Currently, some older pupils have gaps in their subject knowledge. This is due to the weaknesses in the previous curriculum. Although the school has introduced a common approach to assessment, teachers' checks on learning are not as effective as they should be in spotting and addressing the gaps in pupils' learning. This hinders how well they achieve.

The school has continued to prioritise reading. It has responded appropriately to a recent dip in the proportion of Year 1 pupils who met the expected standard in the phonics screening check. The school has ensured that those pupils whose struggle with early reading receive the support that they need. In addition, the school has used external support well to provide staff with extra training on early reading. This is helping staff to address the gaps in pupils' reading knowledge.

Since the previous inspection, the school has overhauled the way in which it identifies and addresses the needs of pupils with SEND. The school is working closely with external agencies to improve the support that pupils with SEND receive. This means that pupils are able to access more specialist help at an earlier stage of their school life. Supported by

the trust, the school also employs internal specialist services such as speech and language therapy and counselling support. Teachers now receive clear and helpful information about how to best support pupils' needs. They are receiving ongoing training and are beginning to adapt the delivery of the curriculum more effectively for pupils with SEND. Increasingly, this is helping these pupils to access the curriculum.

The reorganisation of leadership roles and responsibilities, at trust and school level, is strengthening leadership capacity and creating clearer lines of accountability. Governors and trustees receive pertinent information so that they remain focused on the key priority of improving the quality of education that pupils receive.

Supported by the trust, the school has been proactive in establishing renewed approaches to managing pupils' behaviour and conduct. All staff receive regular and ongoing training. This is beginning to raise staff's expectations of pupils' behaviour. It is leading to a more consistent approach, with staff using shared strategies, to address pupils' negative behaviour. Suspension rates are reducing and fewer pupils are excluded from lessons. This is helping to create a positive culture. However, the legacy of lower expectations in the past continue to adversely affect the attitudes of some pupils, particularly older pupils, who still cause some disruption to the learning of others.

In response to the previous inspection findings, the school has made improvements to the design and delivery of the programme to support pupils' personal development. Staff with specialist knowledge and training now deliver this programme. This includes specific lessons to provide pupils with important information about personal, social and health topics, as well as careers information advice and guidance.

The trust is utilising external support effectively. For example, the trust regularly requests the help of external partners to audit the effectiveness of the school's provision. This is helping trustees, governors and the school to continually reflect on their practices.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of the Fylde Coast Academy trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Blackpool. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Downing
His Majesty's Inspector