

4 February 2014

Mike Robinson
Executive Director Wellbeing, Care and Learning
PO Box 505
Civic Centre
Middlesbrough
TS1 9FZ

Dear Mr Robinson

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Following the recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors from 27 to 31 January 2014, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

We are grateful to you for your cooperation, and to your staff, the elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This inspection was carried out because of concerns about the achievement and progress of pupils in primary and secondary schools and about the quality of education and training for young people aged 16 to 18. The proportions of school leavers in Middlesbrough who continue with their education or enter employment or training are far lower than the averages regionally and nationally.

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

¹ During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, and elected members of the local authority, governors and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised available documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

Context

The authority's schools are organised into a two-tier, primary and secondary, system. There are 55 maintained schools: 41 primary, seven secondary, three pupil referral units and four special schools. Five of the secondary schools and nine of the primary schools are academies. Three of the secondary academies are sponsor-led. Seven of the primary academies are converters.

Middlesbrough maintains a team of three officers to support school improvement. They work closely with the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance, which is led by a primary teaching school, and the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership. This includes a range of agencies working together to tackle the health, education and social factors which contribute to underachievement. These partnerships aim to foster collective responsibility for the outcomes for Middlesbrough children. All education services and activities are overseen by the Executive Director, Wellbeing, Care and Learning, who was appointed in 2012. The Assistant Director, Schools Partnerships took up post in August 2013.

Summary of inspection findings

The local authority has not established effective partnerships with schools, particularly secondaries. It has failed to balance promoting greater autonomy and school-to-school support with maintaining a secure enough oversight of performance.

The authority is working more closely with the schools' teaching alliance, and a range of agencies, to tackle the social, economic and educational barriers to success. However, this work has not had a significant impact on the performance of pupils and schools.

Attainment at each key stage remains well below national averages. Progress slows as pupils get older; none of the secondary schools succeed in ensuring that pupils achieve well enough given their prior performance.

A third of pupils overall, and over a half of secondary-aged pupils, attend a school that is less than good. This is unacceptable. There have been some significant successes in relation to young people with disabilities or special educational needs. However, the proportion of school leavers who are not in education, employment or training is almost twice the national average, and is the second worst in the Ofsted region of North East, Yorkshire and Humberside.

The authority does not know the schools in the area well enough to bring about the rapid improvement that is urgently needed. The lack of clear systems and protocols for sharing data between the authority and schools, particularly secondary schools,

means that declining performance is not identified early enough for intervention to be timely and effective. Support and challenge are not focused sharply on the schools most in need. Plans for improvement are not monitored closely to ensure that they are effective and that resources are being used efficiently. Information, for example on the quality of governance, is not collated in a formal way in order for the authority to identify and tackle the areas that require pressing attention.

The leadership from elected members is weak. They have focused too much on the individual schools with which they are directly involved rather than taking an overview of attainment and progress across the area. Therefore, they do not appreciate how poor performance is across the authority. They do not have sufficient understanding of data and other information to identify the most serious weaknesses and to determine the key priorities for improvement. They are not well placed to hold officers and schools to account, or to champion young people's rights to high-quality education.

Areas for improvement

The local authority should take swift action to:

- establish closer relationships between primary and secondary schools, in order to improve transition between phases, to arrest the decline in students' performance during Key Stages 3 and 4 and to raise the attainment of 16-year-olds
- ensure that school improvement services make rigorous use of data and information, so that they have a clearer understanding of the specific challenges faced by individual schools and can target resources and personnel more effectively
- build on the emerging partnerships between schools, colleges and the business community by producing a coherent strategy to increase the numbers of school leavers in education, employment or training
- establish clearer systems for monitoring the quality of school governance across the authority, in order to strengthen this aspect of school leadership
- improve the quality of the local authority's plans so that they have clear and measurable targets that can be used systematically to monitor progress, assess impact and judge the value for money resulting from the investments made by the council and its partners
- ensure that elected members have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in education, so that they can hold schools and school improvement services fully to account and provide strong leadership.

The local authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection within nine to 12 months.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The authority's vision is to raise aspirations and achievements within the area, in order to improve the life chances and well-being of young people and the community. However, there is a lack of clarity on how that vision can be realised. The revised strategy for improving education is still in draft form. It has not been shared with all partners and is not supported by detailed plans for implementation. The plans that do exist are weak. They focus on tackling underperformance in maintained secondary schools, but place far too little emphasis on Key Stage 1, where attainment has been significantly below national averages for the last five years.
- Elected members have considerable knowledge about the individual schools with which they have been directly involved. However, they do not have a clear overview of education across the authority. They tend to focus on the more positive aspects of provision rather than identifying and addressing weaknesses. They do not provide the necessary leadership to bring about the improvements that are urgently needed. Currently, 80% of primary pupils attend a school that is good or better but only 48% of secondary students do so. Overall, a third of young people in Middlesbrough attend a school that is less than good.
- The authority is facilitating closer links between schools, colleges and the business community to improve opportunities for 16- to 18-year-olds. This has led to some positive results. For example, of the 52 young people with disabilities or special educational needs who left school in 2013, 49 have continued in learning. Overall, however, the proportion of school leavers who are not in education, employment or training is almost twice the average nationally and is the second worst in the region. The authority and its partners have yet to produce a coherent strategy to tackle this problem.
- Over the last 18 months, considerable focus has been placed on developing the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership with a range of agencies, including health, in order to tackle the social as well as the educational factors that contribute to underachievement. Senior officers have also been energetic in promoting the autonomy of schools and school-to-school support for improvement. Primary schools have embraced these changes more readily than secondary schools, but the latter have recently begun to work more cooperatively with each other and the authority. However, the impact of these changes, in terms of raising standards, is yet to be seen.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The authority's approach to monitoring, challenge, support and intervention is based on collaboration between its advisers, the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance and the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership. The lines of communication between these agencies are clear; staff from the various services know what their specific roles are and how these relate to the overall approach.
- The authority rates its maintained schools on a three-point scale, ranging from those that are performing well to those that require considerable additional support and challenge to improve. Given the weaknesses in achievement across the authority, too few of the schools have been identified as in need of intensive support and/or intervention. The focus on providing all primary maintained schools, regardless of their ratings, with an equal entitlement to three days' support, means that this support is not targeted on the greatest need. Although the local authority requires the poorest performing schools to produce an action plan for improvement, there are no formal mechanisms for reviewing the effectiveness of these plans in raising achievement.
- The authority brokers a range of additional support, mainly through the schools' teaching alliance, but the impact of this is yet to be apparent. Advisers have some knowledge of the external support on which schools could draw. However, this mainly focuses on what is offered by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, with limited use being made of other resources regionally and nationally.
- The authority's data team offers a sophisticated range of analysis tools to schools to enable them to track the progress of every pupil at the end of each term and each key stage. All primary mainstream and special schools use this package or buy into it if they are academies. Primary schools have also agreed a protocol for sharing data with each other and are working towards doing so on a termly basis.
- Secondary schools have their own data management systems but only some share the end-of-key-stage data with the local authority. Secondary academies have only recently begun to collaborate with the authority. As a result, officers are not in a position to identify decline in schools' performance early enough, to report concerns to the DfE and ensure focused challenge or timely intervention. This is a major weakness given that, in every academy and secondary school in the authority, pupils fall short of the GCSE levels that their performance on entry indicates they should obtain.

- Historically, the authority has relied on structural changes to deal with underperforming schools. Recently, however, it has made use of the full range of statutory powers available to it.
- The impact of monitoring, challenge and support is limited. Pupils' attainment at all key stages is significantly below the national average. Underachievement at Key Stages 3 and 4 continues and results at GCSE are volatile, with unacceptable swings from one year to the next. There is little evidence that secondary schools are at least good or improving rapidly.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The authority places a strong emphasis on developing leadership at all levels. The induction of new primary headteachers is thorough and well received and there is a considerable focus on developing the leadership skills of subject and key stage leaders. School-to-school support for leadership is developing but, until recently, the pace of this has been hampered by insufficient collaboration between primary and secondary schools and between one secondary school and another.
- The large majority of schools, including academies, buy governor services from the local authority. Governors have a high regard for the services they receive, particularly the induction programme and the regular forum where they debate specific issues and establish connections with colleagues from across the area.
- Although the governor support service has established specific targets for recruitment, there is no indication of how well it is performing in relation to those targets. The vacancy rate on governing bodies is high.
- The range of training offered is not adapted to the varying needs of governors. The feedback on training focuses on administrative issues, such as timing and venues, rather than on the quality, usefulness and impact of what is offered.
- For some governors, there is a lack of clarity about the role of the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership and how they might contribute to it.
- There is no clear system to alert governor services to declining performance in specific schools. Information on the quality of governance is collected by clerks but it is not clear to what extent schools are aware of this and the information gathered is not collated and analysed formally. Therefore, the authority is not well placed to provide additional support, intervene or report concerns in a targeted and timely way.

Use of resources

- The local authority's Schools Management Forum undertakes a range of surveys, reviews and monitoring activities to establish priorities and to identify how best to allocate funding, services and resources.
- The authority's arrangements for brokering support for school improvement are developing. However, commissioning of other resources, such as specialised equipment for pupils with disabilities, is underdeveloped.
- The small size of the authority allows for a considerable volume of information to be collected and shared informally. However, insufficient attention is given to formalising the processes for gathering information so that it can be used systematically to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions taken by the authority and its partners.
- The local authority's action plans drawn up by officers and elected members lack detailed measures of success. Even where such measures do exist, as in school action plans, insufficient use is made of them to measure progress and impact. The local authority does not evaluate the impact of arrangements to support school improvement, whether provided or commissioned. As a result, it cannot firmly establish whether funding is having a significant impact on improving educational outcomes for children and older learners.
- Performance data related to pupil outcomes at Key Stages 2 and 4 do not indicate that interventions or resources have been used effectively to improve standards or pupils' achievement compared with national averages.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive and the Mayor of Middlesbrough. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Aelwyn Pugh
Her Majesty's Inspector