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29th January, 2016

Dear Parent/Carer

Following this letter is our Ofsted inspection report. You will quickly see that we have been judged, in all four areas, as Requires Improvement. We are, as a school community, incredibly disappointed by these judgements but will accept the criticisms and advice and use it to move forward and improve the school.

We have all worked unbelievably hard since our last inspection in November of 2013 and have improved the school in so many ways for your children. What is clear is that the inspection team saw much that they liked in our school but felt that too much of it was in its early stages and as a result had not yet had the impact required. For your interest, at the end of this letter I list some of the changes we have made since the last inspection.

I am working closely and rapidly with the Senior Leadership Team, Governors and the Local Authority to check that our long-term plans are still pointing us in the right direction and that our urgent short-term and medium term plans are executed swiftly and effectively in this academic year. As a school we will have a monitoring visit from one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who will visit us in April to check that we are taking the required actions to move the school rapidly to Good.

The Governors, the Senior Leadership Team and I take responsibility for these findings. In the following paragraphs I will take you through the main areas of strengths and weaknesses that have been identified by the Ofsted team.

Weaknesses:

Pace of improvements

The Ofsted team felt that the Governors and I had not driven change rapidly enough. I am already working with the Local Authority to find me, and Governors, a challenge partner to ensure that this criticism is not levelled at us again. We will find ways of improving the school more rapidly without destabilising it.

Too many pupils not making good enough progress & the achievement of disadvantaged pupils

The inspection team looked at our GCSE results from last summer and, although our headline figure was high at 62% 5A*-C including English and maths, they pointed to key areas that are still not good enough and I will deal with each in turn.

Rates of progress for the most able have not improved in spite of strategies that we have used. Our key focus now is on ensuring that our year 7 & 8 curriculum is challenging from the start. I am also working closely with key staff on improving this area of concern to ensure that our year 9, 10 & 11 students are challenged to make the progress they are capable of.





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Achievement of disadvantaged pupils has not improved rapidly enough (disadvantaged pupils are those eligible for free school meals, children looked after by the local authority and children of members of the British Forces). A key contributing factor in this area is that the attendance of this group of pupils has been poor. We know that getting these children to attend school is the first step to improving their outcomes and life chances. Once they are in school, if they need to catch up, we have an effective range of programmes that we run that will help them make more progress.

Teaching is not yet consistently good

Although the Ofsted team expressed concerns about some of the lessons they saw, they do clearly state in the strengths section on the front page of their report, that we have “taken decisive action to eradicate inadequate teaching” and that “the quality of teaching across the school has improved since the last inspection”. We will look closely at the concerns raised around: maintaining expectations of standards in books; checking spelling of key terms and insistence on the use of technical language. We will ensure that the training for our staff focuses on these areas of concern and that our monitoring follows this up.

Strengths:

Attainment has improved in 2015 and was above national average. The more students who leave our school with the ‘golden ticket’ of 5 A*-C including English and maths, the more we are doing our job of opening doors for them at colleges and on training courses. We were glad that this was recognised.

Leadership has been strengthened across the school. This has taken time and should not be rushed. Regardless of the pressure on me to act more quickly, picking the right people to work in our school is something that I will continue to do with great care. I am glad that the Ofsted team recognised that our appointments, both external and internal, have improved the school.

Pupils behave well. Our pupils, your children, are a pleasure to work with. We are proud of them and they are proud to be Walkden pupils. But this doesn’t happen by accident. It happens because we are all working hard to make this so. It requires a relentless focus on detail and manners. We are going to push again on our expectations of behaviour so that we minimise the amount of learning time lost in lessons due to disruption.

Our work preparing pupils for their next stage after school is exemplary. In one way, the real measure of a school is whether it lifts all of its students up high enough for them to move onto the next step on their journey. We do this fantastically well and I am glad this has been recognised. We will be continuing to improve this aspect of our work to ensure that your children are given the best possible chances to succeed post-16.

As I said at the beginning of this letter, we are all incredibly disappointed by the overall judgements in this report, but I would ask you to read it carefully as there are many positives as well as areas for improvement. Please rest assured that I will be doing everything in my power to continue to lift us to Good quickly.





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Finally, your response to the Parent View questionnaire was phenomenal – thank you for this. I value your opinions very highly and your combined views of the school are remarkably positive. Where there were concerns I have already asked my Senior Team to look at ways of dealing with these. Changing and improving is what we do. What will not change at all is my desire, and my staff's drive, to make everything we do better so that we can deliver on our vision of “creating Walkden STARS”.

Yours faithfully,

Mr S Lennox
Headteacher

Post Script:
For your information...

Since 2013, we have:

- moved from vertical (mixed age) tutor groups with Heads of House to single age tutor groups with Head of Year and have seen a sharp improvement in behaviour as a result.
- moved from three 100 minute lessons to five 60 minute lessons and have seen an increase in pace in lessons and an improvement in the frequency of lessons in the core subjects.
- strengthened and improved staffing in various areas of the school including English, science, languages and PE.
- improved our Behaviour Provision and have much more proactive approaches to inappropriate behaviour than previously.
- appointed a dedicated Safeguarding Officer to ensure our most vulnerable pupils are safe and cared for.
- changed how our Attendance Officer works to improve the attendance of our disadvantaged pupils.
- worked to help our pupils deal with the volatility of the GCSE system.
- improved our school environment by closing off open classrooms where they didn't work
- successfully opened The Hive and completed the building work necessary to make this part of the building conducive to high quality learning.
- supported and challenged staff whose performance was not good enough for your children.

