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31 October 2016

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Dear Mrs Gant

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Edwinstree Middle School

Following my visit to your school on 7 October 2016, 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 March 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:

- produce a self-evaluation of its provision which realistically and precisely reflects the school's current position
- ensure that the few remaining schemes of work are amended swiftly to meet the requirements of the new national curriculum
- strengthen the leadership of subject leaders so that they are able to monitor, evaluate and review the quality of the areas for which they are responsible.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and the chair and two other members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. I also spoke to a representative of the local authority. I held meetings with a group of 12 pupils from Years 5 to 8. I made brief visits to a range of lessons with you and looked at the work in pupils' books. I evaluated the school's post-inspection improvement plan, together with a range of other documents. I also scrutinised the school's record of staff recruitment checks.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, the headteacher has resigned and you took up the post of interim headteacher on 1 September 2016, although you had been working in the school since May 2016 as head of Years 5 and 6. Eight teachers left the school last term, and permanent replacements have been found for all but one of these. The assistant headteacher has also resigned from her post as of December 2016. You have restructured the middle leadership, creating five posts of head of faculty and four heads of year. You have also restructured the school day. All teaching in the school is now in mixed-ability groups, apart from key stage 3 mathematics.

Main findings

You have been extremely proactive since taking up the role of headteacher and have quickly prioritised the key actions which aim to demonstrate impact straightaway. The school improvement plan produced by the previous headteacher has been completely overhauled. The new plan has set realistic deadlines throughout the year against which the governing body will check for progress. The plan makes clear how you will measure the success of your proposed actions. You have already started to evaluate the success of your actions and are clearly prepared to modify your plan if required. The plan is strategic and has prioritised key actions which aim to improve the school at a realistic pace.

You have started to work with teachers to ensure that their assessments of pupils' progress become more realistic. The deputy headteacher has worked with subject leaders to moderate their judgements and to draw on the existing good practice so that it is shared with other leaders and teachers whose practice is currently weaker. This in turn helps teachers set more helpful and realistic targets for pupils. You have chosen to operate the local authority's assessment model which is used by many schools across Hertfordshire. This now enables you to compare your pupils' progress with that of pupils from many other schools. You have revised most of the schemes of work so that they match the content of the new national curriculum and tie in with the new assessment criteria. A few schemes of work still require modification.

Teachers have useful information on their pupils' needs to assist them with planning their lessons. This is particularly important as you have now made most classes mixed ability. They have started to plan better for different pupils' needs by offering them tasks of varying degrees of difficulty to enable them to make better progress. Pupils typically choose how much challenge they wish to take on, or in some cases, they are directed to attempt specific tasks by their teachers. Teachers know who the disadvantaged pupils are in their lessons, but further work is needed to ensure that this group of pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, make the progress of which they are capable. You have plans in place to assess teachers' performance by setting them a target for how effectively they diminish the differences between disadvantaged pupils' progress and that of their non-disadvantaged peers.

Homework is being set more regularly, but you have also acknowledged parents' concerns about homework, and have organised a parents' forum to discuss their reservations about the quantity and quality of homework that is set by teachers. The revised marking policy is being implemented well, and teachers are providing pupils with time to reflect on their comments during the lesson, as identified in the policy. You have wisely provided training to teachers as to how they compose these comments, so that pupils are able to respond in such a way that they learn from their mistakes and rectify any misconceptions. Teachers are also becoming more adept at highlighting errors in spelling. Pupils say that the improved marking system is helping them to improve the quality of their written work. You now issue pupils with a well-written aide-memoire of specific literacy skills which enables and encourages them to practise these skills when they produce longer pieces of writing across a wide range of subjects.

Another notable change is the reduction in behavioural incidents in lessons. You are analysing the impact of your systems on those few pupils whose behaviour gives cause for concern. Communication between staff around pupils' behaviour has improved. Form teachers are informed on the same day if one of their pupils has misbehaved so that they are able to respond to this immediately. Your revised code of conduct is known and understood by pupils and your ongoing monitoring shows that this system is having a positive impact on improving behaviour. Pupils say that they enjoy their lessons more and that learning is fun. They report that their learning is disrupted to a much lesser extent by low-level disruptive behaviour than was previously the case. You have also worked well with pupils to help them understand different kinds of bullying. They have a better understanding of what constitutes bullying, and they know what to do if anyone experiences bullying. Your use of pupils as anti-bullying ambassadors has helped to raise pupils' awareness and understanding of bullying.

Your evaluation of your current school improvement plan enables you to identify what works well and what needs to be changed. This in turn will enable you to evaluate the school's overall effectiveness and inform future planning. You have plans in place to work with subject leaders to develop their leadership and to enable

them to hold members of their team to account. This must happen quickly so that this key group is able to play its full role in school improvement.

You acknowledge that working in close partnership with parents is crucial and have improved methods to communicate with them, through regular newsletters and by forming parents' groups to discuss issues of concern. Your own recent survey of parents of Year 5 children shows greater satisfaction with the school's performance than was perceived at the time of the previous inspection.

The short visits to lessons we made together confirm that the quality of teaching remains variable, but that teachers are attempting new strategies to help them improve. There is clearly some good teaching in the school. In the lessons we saw, the most effective learning was characterised by the teachers' effective use of information about pupils' prior attainment and any known barriers to learning to inform their lesson planning.

Senior leaders are very honest about the challenges the school faces and recognise that the results this year were not good enough. Pupils' achievement at the end of key stage 2 in 2016 was too low in reading, writing and particularly in mathematics. This was a consequence of the weaknesses identified at the time of the previous section 5 inspection, and there was too little time to put matters right. However, my scrutiny of pupils' work shows that standards are steadily improving.

Governors have acted swiftly on the outcome of the external review of their effectiveness and have a suitable action plan in place to address the weaknesses identified. They have actively sought to recruit new governors who bring with them valuable skills. They have rightly created a curriculum committee and provide a higher degree of challenge to the school's senior leaders than previously. This is demonstrated through the quality of the minutes of their recent meetings. They are fully aware of their role in monitoring the impact of senior leaders' actions and the post-inspection action plan identifies key times of the year when governors are scheduled to meet to check progress against the actions in the plan.

External support

Since the previous inspection, the school has received increased support from the local authority. For example, the local authority has worked well with the school to revise its approach to assessment. Numerous consultants have visited the school to help improve the provision, particularly in English and mathematics. Consultants have also carried out useful work to improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour. The local authority has also sanctioned two additional training days in October in order for it to train teachers in assessment and how assessment should inform their planning for learning. The local authority has also scheduled a two-day review of the school's provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding has been undertaken. The quality of the review, which was brokered by the local authority, has been questioned by the governing body and the report has been returned to the local authority in order to make it more helpful in planning for the needs of disadvantaged pupils in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

John Daniell

Her Majesty's Inspector