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9 May 2013

Mrs C Edden
Heathermount School
Devenish Road
Ascot
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Dear Mrs Edden

Monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 to a school requiring improvement

Following my visit to your school on 9 May 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2013.

Evidence

During the visit I met with you and your senior team, the consultant education psychologist, the Service Director, Autism, LDD and Education for the Disabilities Trust and a group of governors. We discussed recent changes to the structure of the senior team and the progress since the school was taken out of special measures and judged to be requiring improvement. You provided me with a comprehensive range of documents outlining the improvements that have been made to the school.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been some changes to the senior team. You are now Principal of the school, the assistant headteacher has been appointed to the post of headteacher on a two year fixed term contract and a deputy headteacher has been appointed.

Main findings

Plans to improve the school are clear and practical. They focus on improving teaching, raising standards in students' speaking, reading and writing and strengthening leadership, including governance.

Teaching is being monitored frequently through a cycle of formal observations and learning walks. Teachers, tutors and teaching assistants are now being given clear advice about how to improve their work. Improvements in teaching are not happening as rapidly as you would like, as a result of staff illness during the spring term. You acknowledge that not enough teaching is good yet. During my visit we discussed the evidence form you have been using for lesson observations. I recommend that you adopt a more flexible format for recording evidence gathered in lesson observations, using the Ofsted criteria to evaluate teaching.

Work to improve students' skills in speaking, reading and writing has started and is beginning to have some impact, although this is not widespread. For example, key words and terms are on display in classrooms and reading is being encouraged by providing daily magazines, comics and newspapers. Students now have a regular library session. A work scrutiny in April identified that the handwriting of most students is very poor, so this has been another focus. You were able to point to specific students who have made great improvements to their handwriting following a programme of extra help. I also had evidence during the visit that some students were becoming more interested in writing because teachers had provided materials that were more motivating. It is important that the drive to improve students' speech and language continues.

The newly appointed headteacher is an existing member of staff with considerable experience and expertise in managing students with autistic spectrum disorder. The deputy headteacher has experience from a mainstream school and is able to bring extra energy and drive to the team. Your role as Principal and these two key appointments have enabled the senior team to focus on the areas for improvement. Governors and the Director of Education for the Trust spoke of renewed optimism and team work among all the staff. There are also plans to ensure that the new responsibilities of the senior team are well-supported through line management and appraisal and that senior leaders are linked with leaders in similar schools.

Since the inspection you have focused successfully on creating an orderly environment in which all students can learn. You introduced a new communication code and refresher training for staff in managing the behaviour of students with autism. As a result the numbers of serious incidents of poor behaviour are considerably reduced since the inspection. This has also led to a calmer atmosphere with few interruptions to learning, as endorsed by a governor who visited the school recently.

Following the inspection, the governing body has been strengthened. New members have been recruited who have the necessary additional skills. The committee structure has changed to sharpen the focus on progress and teaching. Governors told me how much they value receiving the monthly update and how this prompts more critical questioning. The governors are pleased with how much the school has improved, although they understand that there is more to do.

Senior leaders and governors are beginning to take effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, I recommend that further action is taken to:

- provide focused support for the newly restructured senior team in order to sustain improvements
- maintain the focus on improving the teaching of speech and literacy skills
- check teaching regularly, using a more flexible method of recording the quality of learning.

I also recommend that governors become more involved in the daily work of the school and that they acquire greater understanding of how children and young people with autism learn. We also agreed that you would provide me with regular updates on the progress of the school by sending me the monthly report to governors and details of any questions raised.

I will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection. My next visit in the autumn term will include some joint lesson observations with senior leaders and discussions about students' work in speaking, reading and writing.

External support

The school benefits from a good range of support, including the on-site educational psychologist, expert guidance from the Disabilities Trust and the local authority specialist advisors. The school has also forged a strong link with a neighbouring mainstream secondary school. Students from both schools went on an educational visit to Wales and subject teachers from the mainstream school have provided advice and specialist guidance. The two schools also share a horticulture project.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Disabilities Trust and the Director of Children's Services for Windsor and Maidenhead. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector