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Mark Blencowe
Headteacher
Northfield School
Knights Road
Oxford
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Dear Mr Blencowe

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Northfield School

Following my visit to your school on 17 September 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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 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 May 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking incisive and urgent action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you and other senior leaders, three governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated. I analysed a range of the school's documentation. You showed me around the school and we observed the students at work.

Context

The deputy headteacher has left and has been replaced by an internal appointment. The Head of Care has also left the school and been replaced by an internal appointment on an interim basis. One teaching assistant has left and another has started. Two governors have left and three new governors have been recruited.

Main findings

The leadership of the school is now stronger. The newly formed senior leadership team is working well to address the areas for improvement and senior leaders' roles and responsibilities are clear. The headteacher has rightly set high expectations about the rate of improvement of the school. These expectations are translated into appropriate actions in the effective school action plan. For example, the deputy headteacher has quickly introduced a new way of making sure that teachers use information about students' achievement more effectively when planning lessons. As a result, teachers are beginning to match tasks in lessons to students' abilities more precisely, helping students to begin to make better progress. The assistant headteacher is working closely with the interim Head of Care to make sure that the necessary improvements are made to meet the National Minimum Standards for residential special schools. There is now dedicated accommodation, staffing and provision for students with additional special educational needs, led by the co-ordinator for this area who has recently achieved the National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination. This means that those students who need extra help, particularly with their reading and writing, are now quickly identified and support is put in place without delay.

Leaders have trained all staff in effective behaviour management well. This has led to a more consistent approach across the school, and has rightly raised teachers' expectations about how much work students should produce in lessons along with how much work students should be doing independently. Teachers now set students specific and challenging targets, and students' progress is tracked in detail. Parents and governors receive more regular updates about students' achievement. School leaders have improved the process of checking on teachers' performance and made it more detailed and rigorous. As a result, teachers are now more accountable for the progress that students make.

Governance has been strengthened by the recruitment of three new governors who together have a very strong educational and safeguarding background. An effective external review of governance has been conducted which has led to a number of relevant and precise recommendations. Governors have acted swiftly on these. For example, new sub-committees and an Executive Board are now in place which will strengthen the strategic work of the governing body. Governors will now receive better information about students' achievement and the quality of teaching. This will help them challenge school leaders more effectively. Governors played an important role in the creation of the effective action plan and they are fully involved in evaluating improvements.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority is providing very effective support for the school. The local authority officer assigned to the school since the inspection visits the school regularly. He has provided good advice which the headteacher has found useful, including help with restructuring the leadership team and improving the processes to check on teachers' performance. He has a clear role in monitoring the school's progress and challenging school leaders when necessary. He has brokered links with other nearby successful schools. As a result, the Chair of Governors at The Isis Academy conducted the external review of governance and is now providing regular support for the Chair of Governors. Also, the head of mathematics at Matthew Arnold School is providing support with the planning and delivery of the mathematics curriculum.

The local authority has provided funding to support a number of activities, including additional external training on behaviour management and a relevant qualification for the interim Head of Care. It is also part funding support from a National Leader of Education, who is the headteacher at Frank Wise School, an outstanding special school in the area. There has been a review of residential provision by the local authority designated officer which has led to appropriate recommendations and further monitoring and support.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Haynes

Her Majesty's Inspector