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Jim Adams
Headteacher
Litcham School
Church Street
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King's Lynn
PE32 2NS

Dear Mr Adams

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Litcham School

Following my visit to your school on 10 December 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 on 12 September 2013. 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 recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- strengthen the school's ability to demonstrate good progress by increasing the range of performance indicators referred to in the improvement plan
- give a higher priority to ensuring that assessments are accurate and reliable
- provide more detail in lesson observation reports about pupils' learning and progress and about subject-specific aspects of teaching.

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

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with senior leaders, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. Checks were made on the school's systems for monitoring the performance of pupils and staff. The school improvement plan was evaluated, taking into account amendments made following the last inspection. A brief tour of the school was made to talk to pupils.

Context

Litcham School was formed in September 2012 from the merger of Litcham High School and Litcham Primary School. The headteacher had only just been appointed when school was inspected in September 2013. Since then, the school has appointed three new governors.

Main findings

Senior leaders and governors have a very clear vision of the improvements they wish to achieve. There is a strong determination to provide a good standard of education as soon as possible. Senior leaders have already made a start in putting into place the necessary management structures, such as a system for tracking pupils' progress, a regular programme of lesson observation and departmental review and formal performance management arrangements for staff. This is helping middle leaders and teachers to know what is expected of them

The governing body has a good capacity for holding the school to account. Governors all take on responsibilities for finding out about the school's work and communicating this to each other. They have developed a strategic approach of rotating responsibilities to ensure that as many governors as possible have a wide understanding of the school's effectiveness.

The school improvement plan has been revised to take account of the areas for improvement noted in the September 2013 inspection report. The curriculum is being examined closely, with the intention that all pupils will be able to study a rich and relevant combination of subjects. Several initiatives have been launched to strengthen the quality of teaching, including three groups of staff charged with finding ways to promote active learning, incorporate literacy teaching into all subjects and to increase opportunities for pupils to apply numeracy skills outside mathematics lessons. Teachers share the leaders' vision and are keen to improve their own practice. They are getting more detailed feedback from monitoring activities such as lesson observations and checks of pupils' books.

The challenge for the school is to raise standards quickly to make up for slow progress in the past. In addition, the school is committed to helping pupils to become more self-reliant. Marking has been improved to provide more guidance for pupils. Summary assessments of pupils' attainment are made every half-term and the results are recorded in a standardised way. The assessment data is then reviewed through a series of pupil progress meetings, in which senior and middle leaders identify pupils who need extra support to make good progress. Close attention is paid to pupils in groups that under-perform nationally, such as looked after children and those in receipt of free school meals. Leaders recognise that high quality assessment data will be needed to show convincingly that progress is accelerating. They have undertaken some work to increase the accuracy and reliability of assessment, but so far this aspect of improvement has not been accorded a high enough priority.

The results of the 2013 national curriculum assessments show that standards were broadly average at the end of Key Stage 1, but below average at the end of Key Stage 2, particularly in mathematics. Some pupils who had been at the expected level at the end of Key Stage 1 had fallen behind by the end of Key Stage 2, especially in reading and mathematics. Pupils currently in Key Stage 2 have not built sufficiently on the standards they reached at the end of Key Stage 1, but this is mainly due to weak progress in the past. Their progress since the new school was formed is quite good in most year-groups and subjects.

The 2013 GCSE results show pupils achieving well in science and mathematics but, apart from the most able pupils, progress was below expectation in English. Overall, pupils gained above average results in GCSE subjects. With the exception of Years 7 and 8, pupils' progress in English and mathematics since the new school was formed is good. Year 7 pupils have made a good start in mathematics but not in English. The progress last year of current Year 8 pupils was below expectation in mathematics and English.

Linked to the school improvement plan, the school has set itself targets for the Year 11 GCSE results and the Year 6 national curriculum assessments in 2014 and 2015. However, these targets have too limited a scope: targets for attainment in other year-groups and for the proportions making and exceeding expected progress are not incorporated. There are no targets for the proportions reaching higher levels or for the average attainment of each year-group in core subjects. The limited range of targets weakens the improvement plan because it does not make explicit the ambition for good progress in every year-group and every subject.

External support

The local authority is providing a range of effective support for the school, including the 'Norfolk to Good and Great' programme, support networks for middle leaders and a mentor for the headteacher. It has provided a locum headteacher to lead the primary phase and has helped set up links with other schools in similar contexts. The school has also established productive partnerships with successful schools and local leaders of education to support different aspects of its work. This is helping staff to be more outward-looking and to benefit from good practice they see elsewhere.

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

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector