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Mrs Sue Whelan
Headteacher
Eskdale School
Stainsacre Lane
Whitby
North Yorkshire
YO22 4HS

Dear Mrs Whelan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Eskdale School, North Yorkshire

Following my visit to your school on 4 March 2014, 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 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 December 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:

- Establish a formal link with a good or better school to support improvement in the key priority areas
- Strengthen the impact of initiatives to close the wide gap that exists between the most and least effective teaching and learning practices in the school.

Evidence

During the visit, discussions were held with you and several other school leaders, four governors and a local authority representative. I also spoke to students, teachers and other staff, and reviewed documents, such as the school's action plan, monitoring records of teaching and the latest progress data. I also observed teaching and learning in 11 classes covering a broad range of subjects and looked at the work in students' books.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection a class teacher has taken maternity leave. A temporary replacement has been appointed. Two new governors have also been appointed.

Main findings

The school's leaders including governors acknowledge that the judgement that the school's effectiveness required improvement to be good was a huge wake-up call for this formerly outstanding school. However, rather than bury their heads in denial they have responded very positively and industriously to the gauntlet thrown down to them and there are clear indications that the actions taken to date are showing signs of impacting effectively on each of the school's areas for improvement. On reflection, leaders accept the section 5 inspection judgements about leadership and students' achievements were accurate and that there is much work to do to improve the school's effectiveness to good within the set timescales.

Inspection evidence gleaned from observing lessons, scrutinising work in pupils' books and talking to staff and pupils indicates that staff are focusing more closely on ensuring the work set for students is appropriately challenging and that students have more opportunities to apply their developing knowledge, skills and understanding in a practical way. Students are also being encouraged to find things out for themselves and discuss and debate possible solutions to problems rather than being spoon-fed the answers by teachers. Planning is generally sound but sometimes the delivery and/or progressions are not precise enough so that students' progress is inhibited. There was a big gap between the most and the least effective practices in the school which is a concern. Staff have had training to improve their effectiveness but it is early days and time will tell how successful this has been. Although some staff believe they are already operating highly effectively and merely need to keep doing what they are doing but this is not wholly supported by the data provided to Her Majesty's Inspector. Students report that learning is more interesting, taxing and practical than it used to be.

The latest school data indicates that greater proportions of students are making faster progress than they were, particularly in English. However, there are pockets of less effective achievement for certain groups of students. Furthermore, the more-accurate data the school is generating has shown inconsistencies in the achievement of different groups of students in a number of subjects not previously highlighted as causing concern. The school knows that it must iron out these discrepancies if all students are to achieve their full potential.

The school's efforts to raise the profile of good attendance have resulted in improvement. However, rates of persistent absence have not improved significantly and more needs to be done to reduce the number of parents and carers who take their children on holiday during term time. This is not authorised by the school and is impeding the work to raise attendance further. Pupils' behaviour was not a cause for concern during this inspection.

The school's leaders have sought external support to help them increase the accuracy of their judgements of the school's effectiveness, including the quality of teaching and the extent of students' achievement. This has been underpinned by a better understanding of the importance of the progress students make relative to their starting points when they joined the school and not just comparisons with national age-related expectations, and taking account of a wide range of additional evidence when judging the impact of teaching over time beyond what a lesson 'snapshot' looks like. A more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluation has sharpened the school's practice and leaders are better able to challenge and support staff more precisely. The school's leaders have also improved the quality and regularity of the information they provide to governors.

Actions taken since the section 5 inspection have strengthened governance. The governing body is better-equipped to hold the school's leaders to account for driving improvement. Scrutiny of minutes of meetings indicates that governors are asking challenging questions and that they are more au fait with the full extent of their roles and responsibilities. Governors concede that the past few months have been a steep learning curve. They have accepted and begun to adopt the recommendations of the external review of governance. The membership has been bolstered by the addition of two new governors with educational expertise. Other governors have benefitted from training, advice and guidance related to all aspects of the school's work including interpreting student performance data. Governors visit the school regularly and have a robust system for holding the school's leaders to account for the school's improvement. Governors are keen to translate their passion and commitment to the school into more tangible strategic influence and they have made a positive start.

The school's development plans are fit for purpose. There are several assessment points built-in where leaders, governors and the local authority can gauge the relative success of the strategies being implemented to improve pupils' achievement and increase the impact of leadership and management. There are clear lines of accountability and the sequence of strategic actions is well-conceived and sufficiently focused on improving the school urgently but in a sustainable way.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. The school should email a termly progress update to the lead inspector.

External support

Over time, the impact of local authority's work with the school has not been good enough to halt the decline in its effectiveness. More recently, the school has been subject to extensive intervention. Scrutiny of local authority notes of visit and reviews indicate that they have been more pointed in highlighting the school's shortcomings and more forthright in determining the nature of support and guidance to provide. Some effective work is being undertaken at a strategic and operational level to: develop more robust and reliable assessment information; provide training and make recommendations to improve the efficiency of governance; and support the quality of provision in English. The local authority lead officer is currently visiting the school fortnightly and the level of accountability demanded and constructive challenge provided has increased markedly.

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

Yours sincerely

John Young
Her Majesty's Inspector