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Ms A Crawshaw
Headteacher
Acklam Grange School
Lodore Grove
Middlesbrough
North Yorkshire
TS5 8PB

Dear Ms Crawshaw

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Acklam Grange School, Middlesbrough

Following my visit to your school on 20 May 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:

- Sustain the momentum and ensure consistency in the impact of strategies to raise the achievement of different groups of students and improve the quality of teaching, marking, feedback and target-setting.

Evidence

During my visit, I met with you, several other school leaders, five governors and two local authority representatives. I spoke with students, teachers and other staff. I reviewed progress, attendance and behaviour data, your action plans and monitoring records of teaching. I saw 12 lessons, and your internal exclusion provision, and examined the work in students' books.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection several appointments have been made including two deputy headteachers, co-leadership of science, and teachers of mathematics, modern foreign languages and science. Three teachers and a governor have left the school, two other teachers have

resigned and there are vacancies for one English teacher and one geography teacher.

Main findings

Despite being disappointed in the judgement that the school required improvement the school's leaders and governors have not let this distract them from refining and continuing to implement the key strategies that have delivered results over time. At this point in the school's journey towards becoming good there are several key indicators that the action being taken is having an increasingly effective impact, particularly in improving student achievement. However, there remain some inconsistencies in, and barriers to, improving outcomes and the quality of provision for different groups of students across a number of subjects and year groups, and the effectiveness of some leaders and managers.

Inspection evidence and the school's latest progress data indicate that better teaching and more rigorous assessment, monitoring and intervention is improving students' progress. This is particularly the case for boys in some subjects and in closing the gaps between those eligible for free school meals and other students. The proportions of students on target to make, and to exceed, expected levels of progress in English and mathematics are also higher than last year. However, progress in science is an area of relative weakness.

It is clear from observing lessons, examining pupils' books and talking to staff and students that generally there is a greater focus on using assessment information to plan work that helps students of differing abilities to make good progress. Teachers encourage students to think for themselves, work together more productively and rely less on the direction of the teacher and this is supporting learning. A sharper focus on marking clearly informs students what they can do to improve their work. Teachers are creating more opportunities for students to read and respond to teachers' feedback. This has been underpinned by extensive and tailored staff training and development. Regular and detailed monitoring and feedback is challenging and supporting staff to improve the effectiveness of their work. The challenge is to ensure all staff routinely apply and adhere to the agreed protocols and non-negotiable principles in place for teaching, marking and feedback and behaviour management. The school recognise that some changes to curriculum provision are necessary to ensure students make more effective progress, especially in science.

Student attendance continues to rise and the number of persistent absentees continues to fall as a result of the effective strategies being employed by the school. The number of different students receiving fixed or permanent exclusions has fallen considerably. However, there are a group of 'harder to reach' students who are repeatedly missing vital days of learning due to their behaviour.

Collectively, leaders are having a more influential impact on driving school improvement. Middle leaders have been given the autonomy to support and challenge their teams to become more effective and are developing their confidence to take on this role. An enhanced accountability structure has been introduced that clarifies everyone's specific roles and responsibilities and identifies exactly what is expected of them. There is 'no hiding place', especially for senior leaders who are just as accountable. Self-evaluation is honest and largely accurate and has helped to shape a suitable plan which is demonstrating its value by the fledgling signs of further improvement evident throughout the school.

Governors' loyalty and commitment to the school and their optimism for its future is counter-balanced by their realism and accurate appraisal of what remains to be achieved

before the school can legitimately be acknowledged as a good school. They know the school well, maintain a high profile and have developed several mechanisms to check the impact of the improvement strategies being rolled out. Scrutiny of the minutes of their meetings shows that they are carrying out their duties assiduously and routinely ask challenging and pertinent questions of the school's leaders. Moreover, they have become more adept at cutting through the rhetoric and triangulating the various pieces of information they receive and request to arrive at a more reliable view of the school's current effectiveness.

The school's development plans are appropriate in the sense that there are logically sequenced, clear, relevant and specific actions identified to address the key issues with measurable outcomes, suitable lines of accountability, monitoring and evaluation systems.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. In the meantime, the school should email a termly progress report to me.

External support

The local authority has devolved money directly so that the school can choose and commission support and challenge. Alongside this, local authority officers and subject advisors have provided some sound advice and guidance to aid the school's improvement planning. The school is also profiting from external consultants and the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership of secondary schools, who have given support in key subjects requiring improvement such as mathematics, modern foreign languages and science. The partnerships forged with Outwood Grange Academies Trust, and Shotton Hall School, an outstanding school in Durham, are also effectively supporting the school's improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

John Young
Her Majesty's Inspector