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27 June 2014

Miss Helen Emmett
Acting Headteacher
Thomas Hickman School
Belgrave Road
Aylesbury
HP19 9HP

Dear Miss Emmett

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Thomas Hickman School

Following my visit to your school on 27 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in March 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with you and the consultant headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Education for Buckinghamshire Learning Trust. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated. Other documentation such as the governing body external review report was scrutinised. With you, I visited several classrooms, talked to pupils and looked at their workbooks.

Context

Since the inspection the headteacher has left the school. You were the previous deputy headteacher and are now the acting headteacher. The local authority, contracted through Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, has deployed a consultant headteacher to work in the school for three and a half days a week. One teaching assistant and a reception teacher have left the school since the inspection.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The appointment of a highly effective consultant headteacher is providing considerable benefit to the school. Her support has enabled you to focus swiftly on the right things. Since the inspection you have worked with relentless determination to promote the rapid pace of change already evident in the school. With the consultant headteacher, you carried out a forensic analysis of all standards in the school. This led to the swift creation of effective new systems to support improvements in teaching and learning and to monitor their impact. Governors have supported your strategic approach to training: all professional development is now precisely tailored to individual teachers' needs. Your approach has effectively harnessed the keenness of all staff to ensure that the school becomes good as quickly as it can: you reflect that staff are all 'hungry to move forward'.

The leadership team has a new structure and leaders are much clearer about their responsibilities; all now play a significant part in raising standards. For example, intensive work on raising attendance through meetings with parents and carers and a new rewards system has resulted in steady improvements so that attendance is now in line with national levels.

You have sensibly focused on improving the rate at which pupils make progress and raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve. Inspirational displays give clear examples of and celebrate the rapid gains that pupils have made. Pupils' books show early improvements in presentation and handwriting, and pupils have increased pride in their work. The gains made by pupils in Year 6 are impressive. All pupils are now on track to make expected levels of progress in reading; almost all in writing and mathematics. More impressively, the proportion of Year 6 pupils making more than expected progress now appears significantly higher than the national level. This sharp rise in achievement is mirrored in Year 1 where over one fifth more pupils than last year have met expected standards in the phonics check. In Year 2, pupils have made accelerated progress and are already achieving much higher standards, particularly in mathematics. Attainment for pupils remains at slightly lower than typical levels but it is improving quickly.

There has been effective training for teachers in marking and feedback. In addition, pupils have been taught how best to respond to comments from teachers so that they can improve their work. This is already making a difference. You have also demonstrated a rigorous focus on teachers' planning. Teachers plan more effectively than previously so that some are now able to challenge pupils of all abilities with appropriate work. This is starting to improve the quality of teaching; significantly more teaching is now good than in March. Your judgment of the quality of teaching is now better informed by standards of planning, feedback and marking, and by how much progress pupils make.

An external review of governance has been carried out; however this lacked rigour. It did not link appropriately to the areas identified for improvement from the last inspection, or to the school improvement plan. Despite this, governors demonstrate a more sharply informed grasp of standards in the school and make a keen contribution to the improvement planning process. The Chair of the Governing Body is assiduous in recruiting members with appropriate skills to the governing body. There are now close and helpful links with Buckinghamshire Learning Trust. A Rapid Improvement Group (RIG) has been set up: governors and senior leaders use these meetings to check the progress made by the school against the improvement plan. Governors have created a helpful action plan, but it does not yet identify the impact of their work sharply enough. Governors have a high degree of confidence in your leadership.

You sensibly decided to integrate the school improvement plan with the local authority statement of action. This has ensured a thorough and robust document. It now forms the touchstone for all improvements and is effectively used to measure success.

The local authority, through the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, has offered very good support to the school, largely through the consultant headteacher. High levels of effective training, collaborative work and monitoring have made a real difference to the school in a short time.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Anwar
Her Majesty's Inspector