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20 October 2014

Mr Brendan Aspell
Headteacher
The Meadows School
School Road
High Wycombe
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Dear Mr Aspell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Meadows School

Following my visit to your school on 20 October 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. 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 July 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- bring together different plans into one succinct improvement plan so it is clear:
 - when actions will take place
 - who will lead on each action
 - who will monitor the effectiveness of each action
 - how success will be measured against outcomes achieved by pupils.
- share the improvement plan with all governors and staff in order to provide clear direction
- ensure that systems are in place to allow the governors to hold the headteacher and senior leaders to account for delivering improvement.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the acting Chair and acting Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, other senior leaders and a representative from Buckinghamshire Learning Trust to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school's improvement plan. In addition, I scrutinised other school documentation including records of leaders' monitoring activity. I joined you on a tour of the school and visited every year group, taking the opportunity to talk to pupils about their learning.

Context

The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body have been in acting positions since April 2014.

Main findings

You and governors have not met to formally discuss the section 5 inspection findings. Leaders have only recently completed the school's improvement plan; as a result, the full governing body has yet to see it, discuss it or adopt it. This means that staff and governors are not clear about the school's priorities this year, and the part they need to play in these. Other plans from the Learning Trust and local teaching school, although written helpfully, simply add to the confusion. As a result, there has been a slow, incoherent start and leaders have had insufficient early impact on improving teaching.

Leaders are not clear enough in their expectations and inconsistent practice is emerging across the school. For example, although pupils now have more regular opportunity to practise a cursive script, they do not all receive timely encouragement to apply their handwriting skills to their own 'free' writing. As a result, standards of presentation are not improving rapidly enough.

Leaders have reviewed the way that teachers' provide feedback to pupils. Pupils' basic errors, such as spelling mistakes, are now identified as a matter of course. Pupils are given time to respond to the feedback they have received and are now correcting basic errors more routinely. Pupils are positive about this, saying this helps them improve their spelling skills.

Despite this slow start, you have strengthened arrangements for checking the quality of teaching. Leaders visit lessons regularly and scrutinise work in pupils' books. Teachers use improvement points from these visits to develop their practice. Plans to establish a link with a local teaching school have been finalised and agreed. Teachers now have the opportunity to observe outstanding teaching in a local academy. However, until very recently, these visits lacked focus and so their impact on improving teachers' skills and expertise has been limited.

You have introduced new ways of working and pupils now have clearer writing targets. Individual targets are helpful because pupils are able to use these to identify what they are trying to improve in their writing. However, inconsistency prevails; additional group targets in writing are less useful because they are less focused on the specific issues pupils face. As a result, pupils rarely refer to them. Leaders agree that it would be helpful to settle on one system.

Governors are keen to improve the school but do not receive the information they need promptly enough. Not all governors have had sight of the school improvement plan. Equally, the schedule for governor meetings is not well-timed. The first full meeting is not scheduled until the end of November 2014; this is not soon enough. Because of delays and a lack of urgency, governors have yet to establish a helpful monitoring schedule in order to check for themselves the work of the school. This needs addressing straightaway, so they are better placed to offer challenge and support.

HMI are likely to return to the school to provide further support and challenge.

External support

Buckinghamshire Learning Trust provides beneficial support. At the beginning of term a school improvement officer conducted a useful book scrutiny. As a result, teachers received helpful advice on how to improve their marking. The Learning Trust has brokered useful support from Wycombe and Marlow Alliance, namely Chepping View Primary Academy. Visits for teachers to observe other practitioners are useful and more are planned.

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

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Farr
Her Majesty's Inspector