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Johanne Clifton
Associate Principal
Croft Academy
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Walsall
WS2 8JE

Dear Mrs Clifton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Croft Academy

Following my visit to your school on 21 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.

Senior leaders and the sponsor are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The sponsor should take further action to:

- secure long-term stability at senior leadership level
- simplify the arrangements for checking the work of the school so that the regional director and the members of the board can identify issues more quickly and respond promptly.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the head of school, the assistant principal, a representative from the sponsor, the Chair of the Local Governing Body and three other governors, some teachers and two teaching coaches from Billesley Primary School to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. A range of documentation was reviewed including the latest information about pupils' achievement and

feedback to staff following lesson observations. You, the head of school and the assistant principal joined me on brief visits to classrooms to talk to pupils about their learning and to scrutinise pupils' work.

Context

Croft Academy became a sponsored academy with The Elliot Foundation in September 2012. Since the recent inspection there have been significant changes at leadership level. The principal retired at the end of the summer term. The Elliot Foundation responded by appointing interim leaders. Staff from Billesley Primary school, a school that is also a member of the Elliot Foundation, were asked to provide support at Croft Academy. You, the head of school, the assistant principal and teaching coaches have been working at the school since August 2014.

Main findings

You have swiftly gained an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The school improvement plan has been appropriately revised to ensure it is focused on tackling the issues identified by you and other senior leaders, and the areas for improvement identified in the recent inspection.

Together with the head of school, the assistant principal and the teaching coaches, you have been instrumental in bringing about immediate improvements in teaching and pupils' achievement. Your records of teaching confirm that teaching is improving. Following lesson observations and reviews of pupils' work senior leaders provide teachers with helpful advice and identify where further improvements are required. Teachers benefit from the opportunity to observe effective practice at Billesley Primary. Some of the teachers I spoke with were particularly positive about the work of the teaching coaches. One commented, 'I now know how to improve.'

Pupils' behaviour has improved. During our brief visits to lessons, we observed pupils approaching their activities with enthusiasm. They were keen to show me their work. Pupils told me that their work was 'more interesting' and that their teachers showed them how to complete their activities when they were 'stuck'. We saw teachers carefully explaining what pupils were expected to learn by the end of the lesson and providing most groups of pupils with suitably challenging activities. In a few instances, the activities for the most-able pupils were too easy.

Teachers' marking has improved. They use a 'star' to acknowledge pupils' achievements and a 'wish' to tell pupils what could be even better is helping pupils to make faster progress. Pupils I spoke with confirmed that this approach is helping them to improve their work.

Your information about pupils' achievement shows that standards are low with almost half of the pupils working below age related expectations, especially in Year

4. Pupils' work shows that rates of progress are accelerating. This improvement has been achieved by teachers placing a greater emphasis on helping pupils to develop their basic mathematical skills and improve their skills in handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation. Opportunities for pupils to write at length are developing well.

The arrangements for checking the work of the school and holding senior leaders to account are too complex. They involve a range of people, including the members of the local governing body, the progress partner, the regional director and the members of the board. The sponsor has started to review the way in which information about the school is gathered so that the regional director and the members of the board are alerted to issues more quickly. For instance, plans are in place for the progress partner's reports to focus more on the achievement of pupils in all year groups, and to include regular scrutinies of pupils' work.

Members of the local governing body are beginning to check the work of the school for themselves. To strengthen governance further, the sponsor has organised extra training for members. In addition to this training, HMI recommends that the sponsor arranges for an external review of governance.

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

External support

In the recent past, issues in the school have not always been identified quickly enough and the response to weaknesses has been slow. Since the section 5 inspection, the sponsor has taken decisive action to strengthen the leadership of the school. Staff from Billesley Primary School are providing staff at Croft Academy with a good level of support. The impact of their work can be seen in stronger teaching and better rates of progress. In order to continue building on these improvements and help the school move quickly to 'good', HMI recommends that the regional director and the local governing body secure long-term stability at senior leadership level.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Walsall and the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Usha Devi
Her Majesty's Inspector