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Anne Hendon-John
Headteacher
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Handel Terrace
Southampton
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Dear Ms Hendon-John

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Polygon School

Following my visit to your school on 26 January 2015, 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 September 2014. 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:

- ensure that the use of the pupil premium funding is evaluated more precisely by its impact on students' progress
- evaluate improvements to teaching, engagement plans and the curriculum by their impact on students' rates of progress, attendance, behaviour and well-being
- track students' short-term targets and small steps of progress more closely.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, representatives from the local authority and members of the Governing Body to

discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated, in addition to a range of documentation related to attendance, behaviour, achievement and governance. I accompanied you on a tour of the school to visit classes and had lunch with a group of students.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection one teacher has left the school. A long-term supply teacher has been appointed as a replacement on a temporary contract. The school has appointed a pupil engagement officer to work specifically on improving attendance and students' progress. She has been in post since the start of the second half of the autumn term.

Main findings

You have responded with determination and energy to the inspection judgement made in September 2014. You and your team have focused closely on the areas for improvement identified in the inspection and made it your business to galvanise other agencies, including the local authority, into more effective action to improve outcomes, attendance and safety for students in the school.

The action plan to improve the school is clearly focused on the areas for improvement. A task force has been set up to review the plan and evaluate improvements. You are beginning to accumulate a range of convincing data to demonstrate improvements.

You are rightly focusing on poor attendance as a safeguarding concern, because frequent absence from school puts students at risk. Your good working relationships with parents have not stood in the way of a much firmer stance on ensuring better attendance at school. Letters to parents have been sent, highlighting their responsibilities and you have not shied away from invoking legal action where necessary. You make sure that students who may be vulnerable to risks outside school are supported through the local authority child protection procedures.

Your tougher line with parents and carers has been supported by more urgent and effective action taken by the local authority. As a result, students whose absence rates were among the highest in the school, are now attending more frequently and beginning to make better progress in their learning and well-being. In addition, the pupil engagement officer has developed more appropriate programmes of study and support to help students make the right choices about coming to school. There are remaining concerns about a very few students, but the school and local authority are making a concerted effort to ensure that students' whereabouts and safety are tracked more closely and that they attend more frequently.

You have ensured that leaders, teachers and governors have a better grasp of what pupil premium funding is being used for. There is now a direct statement of principles and a clearer idea of students' entitlement. You are tracking the spending student by student, but it is not clear in your evaluation how spending is linked to students' progress, improvements in behaviour or increased attendance. School leaders can describe what they think the impact on individual students might be, but this is not translated into measurable outcomes. A review of the spending is pending, once the commissioned partnership with a national leader of education has been finalised.

The number of fixed-term exclusions has been reduced. You are tracking students' attitudes to learning and low-level behaviour incidents through a useful database. The information about students' behaviour is gathered and discussed in staff briefings, which is leading to greater consistency and increased understanding of students' emotional and behavioural difficulties. School leaders ensure that timely responses to students' behaviour are made, including changes to timetables and supportive programmes of study which directly target students' emotional needs. However, not enough has been done to analyse the improvements made and learn from any successes.

The school continues to offer effective teaching which leads to good progress for those students who attend well. An impressive range of extra-curricular activities contributes to students' well-being and experiences and is very much valued by students, parents and staff. You assess students accurately and are acutely aware of their sometimes very low starting points, particularly those students who join the school at times other than the beginning of the school year. You set ambitious targets for students, in line with mainstream schools. However, not enough is being done to track students' small steps of progress, or to map out their varied rates of progress from their starting points in the school. For example, your tracking system does not enable you to demonstrate whether students make quick leaps forward when they join the school or whether their rates of progress speed up once they are settled in.

The school's essential work to improve students' literacy skills is effective, particularly in reading. Students' reading ages typically go up while in the school, as a result of effective extra help and skilled teaching. During the monitoring inspection it was impressive to see students reading and discussing a challenging fiction text. They recalled the story in detail and related to the feelings and experiences of the main characters. Students showed they could 'read between the lines' and a strong sense of empathy and tolerance.

Governors took careful note of the weaknesses found at the section 5 inspection and have reviewed their responsibilities. The review of governance has now taken place, rightly identifying three key priorities, including students' attendance, the use of

pupil premium funding and links with good and better schools. Work to improve the effectiveness of governance is still in progress because the governing body is due to reconstitute at Easter. However, during the monitoring inspection, governors were able to demonstrate clearly that they are asking school leaders more challenging questions. They are developing sharper skills when evaluating plans to improve the school and the impact of actions on students' achievement and well-being.

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

The school now benefits from much better support from the local authority. At the time of the last inspection, there was very little help for the school, particularly from other agencies who could back up the school's work to improve attendance. The school and local authority officers are now working together strategically and operationally to make improvements. Local authority officers see the school as a valuable resource for improving outcomes for students in the city and are determined to support its financial viability. The two education welfare officers attached to the school have taken more urgent action to improve student engagement and attendance, including hands-on work with parents. There are also plans in place to make more efficient use of Child and Adolescent Mental Health teams during the school day, ensuring that students attend essential appointments, but do not miss education as a result. The inclusion leader complements the school improvement task force and provides a clear understanding of the complex needs and vulnerabilities of students who are in the care of local authorities. As a result, there is a sense of greater control and more confidence that the school can make a positive difference to the life chances of students. In addition, a link has been sought with a national leader of education in a neighbouring local authority, in order to share good practice, particularly with improving attendance, governance and the school's use of the pupil premium funding.

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector