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Mrs Andrea Mead
Headteacher
Cramlington Hillcrest School
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Dear Mrs Mead

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Cramlington Hillcrest School, Northumberland

Following my visit to your school on 21 April 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 January 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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:

- Stabilise staffing and improve the quality and effectiveness of subject leadership, particularly in mathematics.
- Increase the pace and urgency of the school's work to improve the sixth form curriculum and the range of qualifications to meet students' interests and needs.
- Strengthen school plans by ensuring that timescales, actions and success measures are clear and show the intended impact of actions on students' learning and progress.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, students, one governor, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The work of the school was evaluated, a range of documentation was scrutinised including the school's action plan, achievement data, reports to governors and the outcomes of monitoring activities. A tour of the school was undertaken and parts of several lessons were observed.

Context

Since the inspection which judged the school to require improvement, a deputy headteacher has been appointed from within the school. Over one third of teachers and one quarter of teaching support staff are absent through ill health. Several temporary staff are currently in school to cover the long term and frequent short term absence.

Main findings

The school has made slow progress to tackle the areas for improvement in the three months since the school was inspected. School plans cover each of the areas requiring improvement. However, the pace in implementing plans has been slow and timescales and measures to judge the impact they are having on students are not sharp enough to enable leaders and governors to hold staff to account. Very little work is taking place to improve the quality of the sixth form curriculum and to determine the qualifications offered in readiness for September. Leaders and governors have not pursued this aspect of the plans with the speed and rigour required.

Despite the steps taken to expand senior leadership, through the appointment of a deputy headteacher, the continuing high rates of staff absence are undermining efforts to drive improvement. The continuing disruption is taking a high toll on students' learning, particularly in mathematics: just under one third of students are making little or no progress and progress is slow for many others. Leadership is not sufficiently developed at senior level and throughout the school to provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' performance in reading, writing and mathematics. Checks on the quality of teaching and its impact on students' learning are not fully established to remedy this situation. However, checks undertaken in the weeks prior to this inspection are much more carefully focused and leaders have begun to identify weaknesses whereby some pupils are given work that does not challenge them enough or is confusing. During this inspection we discussed how the good practice that is also emerging in the school, together with forthcoming work with partner schools, might be used to help tackle these issues and develop accurate and robust assessment systems.

Students remain generally positive about the work taking place to help them to develop their understanding and skills in reading and writing. They are increasingly

meeting the school's expectations of behaviour and conduct, particularly when entering classrooms and during lessons. Exclusion rates are starting to fall and the school is calmer. The creation of additional classroom spaces such as, 'The Base', 'The Garage' and 'The Links' are helping to manage students' behaviour particularly those who require temporary additional support for example, during crises as a step towards re-integrating fully into school. Leaders have begun to take the first steps towards tackling high absence rates and small improvements in attendance are evident but have yet to be sustained. Students are aware of the cumulative effect of absence but do not yet know the individual attendance targets they need to strive to reach.

Although key practices are in place and school staff are acting to keep pupils safe, improvements to the school site to increase security need to be addressed urgently.

Her Majesty's Inspector has serious concerns about the sufficiency of the actions being taken by the school. It was not possible to meet with the full governing body at this inspection. Ofsted will return to the school under section 8 of the Education Act 2005, to do so and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

Senior leaders plan to use local networks and school partnerships to support them in improving the quality of teaching; however the precise detail of the support has yet to be determined. Senior leaders and governors are drawing upon the advice of local authority officers to help them in improving the school and especially in tackling protracted staff absence. Guidance and support has yet to secure improvements thus far and a focussed, specific package of measures is being developed urgently by the local authority. The progress and impact of this work will be reviewed at the next monitoring visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Gina White
Her Majesty's Inspector