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9 November 2015

Lesley Heathcote
Principal
Merlin Top Primary Academy
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Bradford
West Yorkshire
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Dear Mrs Heathcote

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Merlin Top Primary Academy

Following my visit to your school on 20 October 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 March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, the academy trust (Northern Education Trust) and the Academy Inspection Board are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders, the Academy Improvement Board and the director of governance for the trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also had a telephone conversation with the academy improvement partner. I evaluated the academy's action plans, together with other documents relating to school improvement and some evidence of pupils' progress and attainment. I spoke with a small group of pupils and heard some pupils read. We visited classrooms together and looked at a sample of pupils' books.

Context

Since the inspection there have been significant changes in leadership and staffing, including your appointment as the new Principal from 1 September 2015. The academy has tried to appoint a vice-principal, but has not been able to make a successful appointment at this stage.

Main findings

Since the last inspection Northern Education Trust has succeeded in appointing you as the permanent Principal. The interim arrangements, and a well-planned transition programme for you, have ensured that the academy has taken appropriate action to address the areas for improvement and increased the momentum of its journey to good.

From September, you were able to hit the ground running, building upon the improvements made by the interim executive headteacher and increasing the pace of improvement. This has come about because you quickly gathered an accurate and precise view of the quality of leadership and teaching and took decisive action to tackle any weaknesses, while ensuring that all staff share your vision and aspirations for the children in this academy. There is clearer direction and raised expectations of staff and pupils.

Although the academy has not been able to appoint a vice-principal, you have continued to develop the senior leadership team, building on the strengths of existing staff and through new appointments. From the outset, you have made your expectations clear and are holding them to account robustly for the impact of the work they do. These senior leaders are committed and are quickly developing the knowledge and skills they need to drive forward the improvements needed. They are key drivers for improvements seen in teaching. They have ensured compliance to the academy's policies and procedures and supported improvements in teachers' subject knowledge, but know they must sharpen the checks they make to evaluate more precisely the impact of teaching on learning.

You are starting to widen the band of leadership by developing middle leaders and are making use of training provided by the trust, as well as tapping into networks through local partnerships. All leaders see this as an essential aspect of development to secure the future of the academy.

The academy makes use of expertise within the trust and local partnerships to develop teachers' subject knowledge. It has maintained strong links with the local authority by continuing with local partnership arrangements to support the improvements in teaching and secure the accuracy of assessment.

Action plans to improve the academy are appropriate and well timed, but still lack clear and measurable outcomes, so that precise checks cannot currently be made on the progress the academy is making.

Pupils have strong opinions about how much their academy has improved and what difference you are making. They say their lessons are more engaging and there are more opportunities to do things that are fun and help them learn. They enjoy the links that are made between their topics and writing and feel this has made writing more interesting. Teachers are now checking their work, suggesting improvements and giving pupils time to check their work, which pupils say is helping them to improve. They have been given responsibilities and have been taught about respect and resilience. These three aspects are becoming embedded in the academy's culture. Pupils like the behaviour strategies, such as 'it is good to be green', because there is a focus on what they do well. They say they now have some 'amazing' books to read and there are systems in place to promote reading. They talk animatedly about what they read. This is beginning to have a positive impact on their learning and progress.

The early years continues to strengthen under the leadership of the phase leader. Some very clear actions have been taken and are planned to improve the setting, curriculum and teaching, particularly for boys. Children in both Nursery and Reception were seen engaging purposefully in learning through play and focused teaching. There are ample opportunities for children to investigate and explore and, when combined with the focused teaching they receive, there are clear indications that they are developing well and learning quickly.

The trust has taken action to secure an interim board with the knowledge and skills to provide the academy with the challenge needed, as well as working on growing the strength and capacity within the governing body to fulfil its role effectively. The board has adopted the trust model of each member taking on a portfolio to focus on specific aspects of the academy's work and it is now developing systems for reporting the outcomes of this work back to the full Academy Interim Board. The board provides increasingly robust challenge through visits to the academy and by meeting with leaders, as well as during meetings. Consequently, the board has a clearer picture of the academy's progress and the impact of actions.

A review of the pupil premium is planned for December 2015. Leaders are focusing more robustly on underachieving groups, including disadvantaged pupils. Teachers' performance targets are more focused on this.

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

External support

You are outward looking and draw upon the support of the trust and other schools within Bradford, as well as external consultants. This is ensuring improvements in leadership and teaching and helping to secure the accuracy of assessment. There are clear lines of accountability from teachers through to the academy trust. The academy improvement partner makes robust checks on the academy's progress and challenges leaders effectively about the progress the academy is making.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Academy Interim Board; the director of the academy trust, Northern Education Trust; and the Director of Children's Services for Bradford.

Yours sincerely

Anne Bowyer

Her Majesty's Inspector