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Emmeline Ford
Principal
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Dear Mrs Ford

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Abbey Park Primary Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 26 November 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2015. 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 in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and representatives of Northern Education Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. A discussion was also held with a small group of teaching assistants. Brief visits to classrooms were made alongside academy leaders to observe teaching. Pupils' workbooks were examined and pupils were questioned about their learning. The academy improvement plan was considered as well as other documents, including the academy's marking policy, curriculum plans, leaders' monitoring notes, academy assessment information and governing body notes.

Context

Since the recent inspection, governors have made the acting Principal's position permanent. They have also appointed a permanent vice-principal. One teacher has retired and a number of teaching support staff have left following a staff restructure.

Main findings

The academy improvement plan shows that you are focusing on the right priorities. The actions you have identified in the plan are comprehensive and demonstrate high expectations. The end-of-key-stage targets are challenging. However, most of the measures of success are focused on what adults should accomplish and not enough on the pupils' learning outcomes. You have set appropriate targets for each class, but need to be clearer about how much progress each pupil should make to ensure that this represents securely good progress. Many pupils will need to make progress in excess of that which is generally expected to enable them to catch up in their learning.

The appointment of an effective vice-principal and the restructuring of the leadership team are enabling you to begin to delegate responsibility and hold middle leaders to account. Middle leaders, under your direction, are increasingly involved in checking the quality of teachers' work and pupils' learning and progress. These checks are regular and thorough. Precise improvement actions are identified, communicated to teachers and followed up. Training provided by the Northern Education Trust, along with the coaching and support from you and your vice-principal, are improving middle leadership.

Teaching is improving because you are making expectations clear to teachers and holding them to account effectively for the quality of their work and the progress of pupils. Senior leaders are both challenging as well as supporting teachers by providing them with successful strategies that are securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching. For example, the systematic approach to teaching early reading in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 is resulting in improved outcomes. However, some teachers still need to match learning tasks more precisely to the abilities of pupils. Where there are weaknesses in teaching, you are addressing them assertively.

Leaders have taken action to improve Key Stage 2 pupils' ability to read fluently and with understanding, and to promote a stronger interest in reading books. The actions are beginning to bear fruit, but in some classrooms more quickly than others as a result of variability in the way teachers use these new approaches.

New approaches to the teaching of writing, introduced by the vice-principal, are supporting pupils' learning better. Pupils' handwriting and presentation are continuing to improve. Appealing texts and interesting topics are providing pupils with meaningful purposes for writing. For example, some Key Stage 2 pupils have enjoyed writing about a recent visit to a Sikh temple. Pupils have plentiful opportunities to practise writing at length, and consequently the majority of pupils are making good progress in their writing. Leaders are continuing to support teachers in planning more precise learning steps so that pupils are in no doubt as to how to produce a good piece of writing. Teachers need to become more effective at helping pupils to apply their growing knowledge of grammar to improve the quality of sentence-writing.

Some marking of pupils' work is effective and some less so. Some teachers are not identifying the most important improvements that need to be made to enable the most rapid progress, particularly in writing. Leaders are regularly checking and providing feedback to teachers to sharpen marking.

Because of the improvements in teaching, progress is improving. The majority of year groups are on track to reach the class progress targets. However, because of previous underachievement, many pupils are still some way behind in their learning and not all are making progress at a rate that will enable them to catch up. In some year groups, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is not closing.

Leaders have begun work on improving the curriculum so that it is more engaging. This work is in its early stages. Pupils of all ages have created some accomplished art work which further enhances the high-quality learning environment. Some topic work, particularly in Key Stage 2, is not challenging pupils enough. Currently, teachers do not have sufficient involvement in planning the content and delivery of subjects other than English and mathematics.

You have, with the support of governors, restructured the deployment of support staff. All teaching assistants are now deployed more effectively, resulting in better quality classroom support for pupils of all abilities. Support staff value the improved communication and challenge.

Under the leadership of the Chair of the transitional Governing Body, governance has strengthened as new members have been added. Governors are offering strong challenge and support to academy leaders. Governors have the skills and experience to be able to check the progress being made. However, leaders and governors need to identify more precise measures of success so that governors' visits focus even more sharply on whether actions are having the required impact. The academy trust is working towards a fully functioning independent governing body with a new Chair by January 2016.

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

Northern Education Trust, the academy sponsor, is providing effective support and challenge. The primary director and the achievement partner make regular visits to check on progress and to challenge at the slightest sign of underachievement. The achievement partner checks the judgements of senior leaders and is helping to guide middle leaders. The trust is meticulously keeping a track of progress towards cohort attainment targets, as well as a raft of other measures such as attendance, every half term.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Northern Education Trust.

Yours sincerely

Philip Riozzi

Her Majesty's Inspector