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Beth Atkinson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Atkinson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Oak Tree Primary Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 4 December 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.

The school should take further action to:

- review progress targets, ensuring they are based on a more thorough analysis of pupils' starting points
- refine the tracking of progress for different groups of pupils to ensure more robust and regular checks are carried out on whether achievement gaps are closing.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior and middle leaders, teachers, members of the governing body and two representatives of Northern Education Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The academy improvement plan was considered as well as other documents, including governing body notes, leaders' monitoring records and assessment information. You accompanied me on my brief visits to classrooms to observe teaching. Pupils' workbooks were examined with leaders. Pupils were questioned about their learning.

Context

Since the recent inspection, five teachers have left the academy and two are on maternity leave. Eight teachers have been appointed, including three newly qualified teachers.

Main findings

The academy improvement plan is focused on the most important priorities. You have identified appropriate actions and timescales for improvement, and listed who is responsible for making sure each action has the required impact. The plan is clear about the desired learning outcomes for pupils. These outcomes are a suitable guide to governors to enable them to understand the improvements they should be checking for. However, progress measures, though based on national benchmarks, are not as helpful as they could be because they do not take into account the starting points of individuals and groups of pupils.

Senior and middle leaders are increasingly involved in checking the work of teachers. These checks are thorough, because they focus on what pupils are learning. You and other leaders are identifying how individual teachers can improve, feeding back to them on action points and following up to check for impact. Senior and middle leaders' action plans are keeping leaders focused on their priorities. However, subject leaders need to make sure their work has more impact beyond the phase in which they teach.

The growing effectiveness of leaders is evident in the improvements in teaching. Strong teaching of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) is resulting in above-average attainment in linking sounds to letters in the early years and Key Stage 1, although too many of these pupils are still below the expected level in reading. The progress seen by inspectors in pupils' writing in upper Key Stage 2 at the recent inspection has been sustained, and writing in other year groups is improving. However, although effective teaching of phonics is resulting in improvements in pupils' spelling, the rate of improvement in writing for younger pupils, particularly the most able, is not fast enough.

There are small improvements in the teaching of mathematics. There is an appropriate emphasis on developing secure, basic written and mental calculation skills, resulting in better progress in these aspects of mathematics. Teachers are beginning to challenge the most-able pupils but need to raise expectations further, ensuring these pupils are given more complex mathematics problems to solve. Pupils need more regular opportunities to practise their reasoning skills.

Pupils are increasingly correcting their work as teachers provide regular opportunities for this. Some teachers are not systematically identifying the most important weaknesses in pupils' work, so these weaknesses continue, hampering the progress of some, particularly middle and lower ability pupils.

Due to the improving effectiveness of the early years leader, who has recently benefited from support and challenge from a lead headteacher from another school, provision is improving. Assessment information shows that children's progress in reading, writing and mathematics in the early years is strengthening. This is because teachers are giving children more opportunities to practise these skills through play and exploration. Also, teachers and teaching assistants are beginning to better challenge the most-able pupils who are targeted to exceed expected levels. However, although activities for children to independently choose are becoming more appealing, and sustaining their interest, these are not always providing enough challenge.

Northern Academy Trust, the academy sponsor, has trained and supported governors so that they are beginning to better understand their responsibilities. The governing body has also undertaken some self-review. As a result, there are signs that governors are beginning to offer more challenge during their regular visits. Some governors are over-generous in their assessment of how well the academy is doing. The trust's Director of Governance will take over as Chair of the Governing Body in January as the current chair retires from her duties.

External support

Northern Education Trust keeps a track of progress towards year group attainment targets every half term. In the summer term, the trust judged that the progress being made by the academy was not fast enough so challenged leaders to increase the pace of improvement. The trust's achievement partner, assigned to the academy in September 2015, has begun to offer some challenge. The trust has brokered the services of a lead headteacher to visit the academy one day a week. This headteacher is providing effective, targeted support, resulting in a recent acceleration in improvement as leaders become more effective. For the time being, leaders remain dependent on this external support and challenge.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Chief Executive of Northern Education Trust. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Philip Riozzi

Her Majesty's Inspector