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Mrs Joanne Gray
Head of School
Grestone Academy
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Dear Mrs Gray

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grestone Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 29 January 2016, 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good academy.

The academy should take further action to:

- carefully evaluate the impact of all actions being taken to improve attendance and seek out other strategies that have been successful elsewhere
- further develop the knowledge and skills of middle leaders so that they are able to drive improvement in the quality of teaching within their subjects.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the head of school and executive principal, other leaders and the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The academy's post-inspection action plan was evaluated, as was the academy's self-evaluation, minutes of local governing body meetings and several other documents. I also joined you on a tour of the academy, where we visited several classrooms and looked at the work in pupils' books.

Context

Since the last inspection, the governing body has been reconstituted and Grestone Academy and Hamstead Hall Academy now share a single local governing body. Two senior leaders and six teachers have left the school and all except one senior leader have been replaced. The head of school has restructured middle leadership, appointing 10 'lead professionals' who lead subject areas across the academy. The academy opened a nursery in January 2016.

The academy continues to receive an increasing number of pupils who speak English as an additional language. Approximately three quarters of pupils currently fall into this category and half of those are either beginner or intermediate English speakers.

Main findings

The head of school, ably supported by the executive principal and senior leadership team, has transformed the culture at Grestone to one where everyone is committed to a shared vision of 'Perseverance, Respect, Independence, Diversity and Excellence'. Leaders are very clear about what needs to be done for the academy to be judged at least as good at its next inspection. They demonstrate a crystal-clear understanding of their pupils' needs and a dedication to giving each pupil the best possible education.

Leaders and governors are honest and accurate in their evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses and are clear about those areas that still need to improve. Leaders and governors have produced a detailed post-inspection action plan that tackles all of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. It also tackles other development areas that leaders have identified. Roles and responsibilities are clear in the plan, both for carrying out its actions and for monitoring and evaluating their success. A committee of the governing body meets regularly to evaluate the plan's progress.

The action plan would be strengthened by the inclusion of sharper success criteria, and evaluation would benefit from a greater focus on the impact that actions are having on improving the achievement of pupils.

Teaching is improving because leaders have introduced some new and some revised policies and practices that all staff understand and are implementing with increasing consistency. The quality and quantity of work in pupils' books have improved because teachers have higher and more consistent expectations of their pupils. Pupils are proud of their books and the work they have done in class.

Teachers have welcomed the whole-school focus on 'how language works', an approach to developing language through text and genre, and they believe that it is transforming pupils' learning. Teachers now give pupils better feedback in their books and this is helping to accelerate pupils' progress in all year groups.

Relatively new lead professionals have taken to their new roles as subject leaders with commitment and enthusiasm. They form a united team who share leaders' ambition for Grestone's pupils. They have all produced action plans for their subjects and their work is beginning to show impact. For example, a more consistent approach within mathematics has already seen improvements in pupils' understanding of mathematical ideas and concepts in Year 6.

Lead professionals are being trained in their role and, to date, they have played little part in evaluating or improving the quality of teaching in their subjects. Senior leaders still drive the improvement of teaching across the academy, but they plan to involve middle leaders more in the near future. The further development of this team is critical to the academy's continued improvement.

Attendance remains stubbornly below national figures despite a raft of strategies being employed by leaders, both to celebrate high attendance and to challenge poor attendance. For example, an attendance officer has been employed to support and challenge families of pupils who do not attend regularly. Leaders understand that they need to evaluate all actions aimed at improving attendance and discard those that are ineffective, while also seeking out new strategies that may have more impact.

The newly constituted local governing body brings considerable expertise to the academy. It is a dedicated group of experts who are passionate about ensuring high-quality education for all young people aged three to 19 in the local community. Governors know Grestone well, including its strengths and weaknesses, and they give high levels of support and challenge to the academy's leaders. Governors are reflective about their own governance structures and composition, and are currently discussing ways in which the local governing body might be more ethnically representative of the academy's local community.

External support

Leaders and governors are effectively drawing upon a wide range of sources of external support that are well matched to those areas in which the academy needs to improve. Hamstead Hall Academy Trust provides Grestone with support in the form of the executive principal, a lead professional for 'how language works' and an improvement partner. St Mary's Teaching School Alliance provides support for newly qualified teachers and networking opportunities for classroom teachers. Titan Partnership provides professional development for middle leaders. Leaders and governors have commissioned additional support from consultants to develop the lead professionals and the academy's approach to inclusion.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Local Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector