

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Andrew Flint
Headteacher
Staindrop School An Academy
Cleatlam Lane
Staindrop
Darlington
County Durham
DL2 3JU

Dear Mr Flint

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Staindrop School An Academy

Following my visit to your school on 26 January 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 June 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 in order to become a good school. The school should take immediate action to:

- refine the post-Ofsted action plan to secure a manageable set of actions, with measurable targets for all year groups and groups identified as underachieving, so that governors can check the impact of leaders' work more clearly on all pupils' achievements across the school
- ensure that reviews of the action plan are accurate and evaluative, analysing the difference that leaders have made rather than just reporting actions completed
- ensure that leaders' checks on the quality of teaching, including scrutiny of pupils' work, focus on the impact of teaching over time on pupils' progress, rather than just checking compliance with school policies
- increase the regularity of formal assessment of pupils' work in Key Stage 3 so that underachievement can be identified and then tackled quickly

- hasten governors' plans to work with parents, to understand and then tackle their concerns about the quality of teaching, their children's progress and the quality of leadership in the school.

Evidence

During the monitoring inspection, I held meetings with you, a group of senior and middle leaders, seven representatives of the governing body including the chair of governors and vice-chair. I also spoke to the education development partner (EDP) from Durham County Council who is working with the school, to discuss the impact of actions taken since the last inspection. Together, you and I visited four classrooms where we observed learning, reviewed pupils' workbooks and spoke to pupils about their work. I also spoke to older pupils during the lunchbreak. I evaluated the post-Ofsted action plan that includes the most recent review of actions. I also scrutinised additional information, including data on the progress pupils are making in lessons, attendance information and outcomes from leaders' reviews of pupils' work and observations of learning in lessons.

Context

The turbulence in staffing found at the time of the inspection in June 2015 has continued. Seven teachers have left the school and seven have been appointed. These comprise: three in the English department, two in the mathematics department and one each in the geography and history departments. Staff absences have resulted in a number of pupils being taught regularly by temporary staff. Since the inspection there have been two changes in the role of chair of governors.

Main findings

School leaders and governors have been galvanised by the challenge to move from an school that requires improvement to good and have quickly taken a wide range of actions to drive improvement. Significant instability in staffing, and weaknesses in the tenacity of leaders' checking of the impact of those actions, is hampering the rate of improvement, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The new leader for mathematics has a very clear understanding of what needs to change and improve and is tackling weaknesses effectively. This can be seen in some mathematics books, where there is evidence of pupils developing a deeper knowledge of mathematical concepts through more open tasks that challenge their thinking and understanding. Weaknesses in English for some Year 11 pupils were identified late last term and the school is now taking action to improve the situation. This has been the cause of great concern to the pupils involved and to their parents.

Arrangements to check the performance of teachers have been tightened and are more robust, making sure that teachers are held to account more closely for the progress their pupils are making in class. Permanent staff have undertaken targeted

training to develop their skills. This, together with support from staff from outstanding schools, who have been working with leaders, is starting to make a difference to the quality of teaching. Teachers have also been trained in using information they have about pupils' achievements to plan learning experiences that move pupils on from their starting points. However, leaders know that not all teachers are assessing pupils work accurately. This was particularly clear last year, when predictions for Year 11 examination results were far too positive. The deputy headteacher is working closely with departments to challenge rigorously, deal with remaining anomalies and improve the accuracy and effectiveness of assessment, particularly in science.

The post-Ofsted action plan is very detailed and links closely to most areas identified as requiring improvement at the time of the last inspection. It is reviewed monthly and information is provided to governors at specific post-Ofsted action plan meetings. Reviews are too positive, focusing too much on whether actions are completed and not on evaluating the impact or what needs to improve further. Measurable targets are focused only on Year 11 pupils' progress, attendance rates and the small number of pupils in Year 7 and 8 who benefit from support through the government's catch-up grant. Information about the catch-up grant's impact is not accurate. The school's detailed records show a much more variable situation than that reported in recent reviews. There are no precise targets for pupils in other year groups or for groups identified as underachieving.

Pupils display positive attitudes to learning in their lessons. They are responsive to teachers and work equally well on their own and in groups. However, older pupils report they have yet to see any significant changes in the quality of teaching and say that pupils' attitudes are not always as good when temporary teachers take lessons. Pupils' work in books is now checked regularly by senior leaders. Until very recently there has been too much focus on checking whether teachers' marking is in line with the school's policy and not the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress over time. Leaders have increased their understanding of the quality of teaching through regular short visits and formal observations of learning in lessons. Written reviews are of variable quality. The best identify the difference teaching is making to pupils' progress in lessons and explain clearly the next steps the teacher needs to make before the next review. This is not always the case.

The school has moved away from monthly 'mock examinations' for Year 11 pupils so that more time can be devoted to teaching rather than 'testing'. Teachers now formally assess and report pupils' achievements half-termly in Years 10 and 11. This enables them to quickly identify underachieving pupils and take action to accelerate pupils' progress. Unfortunately, in Key Stage 3, assessments are less frequent and this risks underachievement prevailing for too long before it can be identified and tackled. Not all teachers use the same format for identifying pupils' assessment scores on their workbooks, so it is confusing what the assessments mean from class to class.

Work to improve attendance rates is making its mark. Rates are at least average and persistent absence rates are reducing well. Leaders are taking further action to narrow the gaps between the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils further. Safeguarding concerns identified at the last inspection were quickly tackled and regularly checked by governors. Governors also check that safe recruitment procedures and health and safety procedures are robust.

Governors have a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have undergone significant training and development to improve their role in challenging, as well as supporting, the school's leaders. They have joined the National Governors Association and are being supported by the EDP and the association in improving their effectiveness. They have demanded clearer information about pupils' progress and the work of the school. An external review of their effectiveness has been completed and action is currently being taken to embed the recommendations into the post-Ofsted action plan.

Governors are fully aware of the concerns expressed by parents in the Ofsted parent survey, Parent View, where over 40% of the 91 respondees would not recommend the school to other parents or do not think the school is well led and managed. Governors are developing plans to become more fully involved with the community of parents to tackle their concerns.

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

External support

The school has received valued, intensive support from the EDP and modern foreign languages and mathematics specialists from Durham County Council. Regular reviews and evaluative reports are provided about the work they carry out and improvements in departments. However, the written reports focus too much on improvements for Year 11 and not whole-school improvements. The school also values the support from leaders and staff from outstanding schools locally: Cardinal Hume Catholic School, the Academy at Shotton Hall and The Hermitage Academy, as well as the support from an outstanding geography specialist consultant. It is too soon to see the full impact of this range of support.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

Her Majesty's Inspector