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Mr Paul Roach
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Roach

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Harper Green School

Following my visit to your school on 25 February 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 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 October 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, I met with you, your deputy headteachers, the leaders of English and mathematics, a representative of the local authority, two governors and the school's improvement partner, who is also member of the school's joint executive board, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I made brief visits to several lessons, during which I spoke with some pupils about their work and looked at their exercise books. I evaluated your action plan and considered the records of monitoring activities undertaken by you and other leaders since the inspection. I considered information about the progress, attendance and behaviour of pupils currently attending the school. I also checked the school's arrangements for keeping pupils safe, including the checks made on staff appointed since the last inspection.

Context

A deputy headteacher has left the school since the inspection in October 2015. An assistant headteacher has been recruited, who will take up post in the summer term 2016. Two new governors have been appointed. Restructuring of the English and mathematics departments has been completed, with the appointment of lead practitioners who have responsibility for leading on specific improvements.

Main findings

The school accepted the judgements reached by the inspection team following the inspection in October 2015 and has maintained the relentless pace of improvement that you initiated when your secondment began a year ago. Together with your senior leaders, who are relishing the challenge of their new posts, you have identified how each of the key aspects of the school's work should be strengthened to ensure that pupils make the very best progress of which they are capable from their respective starting points. Your school improvement plan is concise and the tasks and timelines within it are logical, reasonable, easy to understand and kept under continual review. You know that outcomes need to rise rapidly and this is your unequivocal focus. The school's assessment information, which is now streamlined and reliable, paints a picture of convincing improvement, particularly in English, where there has been considerable underachievement in the past. New leadership has galvanized this department and there is now a sense of great pride in the increased progress pupils are making.

The school's mantra: 'Inspire. Believe. Achieve' has been given new life through a well-designed teaching and learning policy that gives staff clear guidance on your expectations and is backed up by timely support and training to make your raised aspirations achievable. The structured, whole-school approach to teaching and learning that has proved successful at your substantive school has been adopted with enthusiasm by staff at Harper Green. Consequently, there is now an established approach for teachers to use when planning learning, which makes more demands on pupils in terms of academic rigour. Teachers are assessing pupils' work in a reliable and regular way and are more secure in their judgements on the standards of work pupils are achieving because you have put in place arrangements for them to check these with staff in the partner school.

When I visited classrooms, I was struck by the purposeful atmosphere and notable willingness of pupils to share their ideas with each other and their teachers. There was a real sense of pupils being required to explain their thinking, for instance, in mathematics, where they were challenged to explain the equations they were solving to find the perimeter of shapes. The teacher was assiduous in following up misconceptions in such a way that pupils understood how to improve their work. The mathematics department's rigorously analytical approach to picking out exact

strengths and weaknesses in pupils' test performance is paying dividends by enabling teachers to tailor revision work to meet pupils' needs.

In English, pupils wrestled enthusiastically with the complexities of character portrayal in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. English teachers have welcomed the drive to study challenging literature in lively ways that engage pupils' thinking and deepen their awareness of the conventions of pre-twentieth century writing; a well-judged move given the increased demands of the new GCSE specifications. Pupils are now reading challenging texts such as *Dracula* in Key Stage 3, so that they are better prepared to understand the social contexts of significant authors as they enter Key Stage 4. As in mathematics, the commitment to studying concepts in greater depth has been taken forward in new schemes of work. Similarly, in science, there was evidence of pupils being challenged to make conceptual links as they explored Darwin's work on adaptation through a thought-provoking experiment where they considered which style of birds' beak was best adapted to eating seeds. They used their mathematical understanding of mean averages to test their hypotheses.

In all three core subjects, the school's approach to developing the classroom environment is evident. Lively displays of pupils' work are regularly refreshed so that they are relevant and useful to pupils because they provide prompts and discussion points for their learning. This approach is paying dividends, particularly in helping pupils to use more ambitious vocabulary in their speech and writing.

You had identified a need to improve teachers' questioning by helping them to develop a repertoire of approaches. I saw some good evidence of teachers asking probing questions and of pupils questioning each other. The school's marking policy is used to increasingly good effect. This is particularly evident in English, where there is good evidence of pupils' progress accelerating when they act upon the careful advice of their teachers.

Your monitoring of teaching indicates that colleagues are at different points along the journey; not all teaching is consistently good yet, but there is strong evidence of improvement. Specific support programmes have been put in place for teachers who require them, and their progress is reviewed regularly.

A significant strength is the school's approach to improving teaching. This is embedding rigorous quality assurance processes that mean you have a regularly updated, accurate picture of the teaching your pupils receive. Joint observations of teaching and learning, undertaken initially by Harper Green senior leaders accompanied by their peers from the partner school, have brought a level of credibility and consistency to school self-evaluation that was previously missing. Senior leaders' own teaching has been observed and confirmed as good practice. This has given credence to their observations of teachers' practice and ensured that the school's quality assurance arrangements are perceived positively by staff as

being developmental. Training is being rolled out in a staged way, so that your own subject leaders become confident and consistent in making judgements about teaching and learning and more adept at providing support for their colleagues.

Senior leaders regularly record examples of teachers' effective practice using mobile technology; they then use these as illustrations within staff training sessions. The fruits of teachers' hard work are celebrated in this way and their good practice is shared.

Behaviour was judged to be good at the inspection and continues to be so. Pupils understand that the basis of good behaviour at Harper Green is: listen, engage, respect. Behaviour and learning are recognised as inextricably linked. Incidents of poor behaviour have reduced and staff spoke about the positive impact of 'restorative conversations', which they hold with pupils on those rare occasions when they need to stop negative behaviour from escalating. Again, the consistent application of policy is having a significant impact on maintaining a calm and positive atmosphere in school. Good-quality work on British values, recognised by inspectors last October, continues to permeate the school. A recent assembly, initiated and planned by a pupil to challenge extremist stereotypes, has been highly acclaimed by her peers and is a telling example of how pupils' views are actively heard.

The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school has reduced and overall attendance is rising. Pupils' punctuality has improved as a result of friendly 'meeting and greeting' by staff in the morning; senior leaders are a welcome presence in the neighbourhood. The same rigorous and systematic monitoring that characterises other aspects of the school's life now shapes the school's approach to behaviour management. The deputy headteacher's keen eye for detail is shared by her team, including the newly appointed student welfare officer who assiduously and effectively follows up all absences.

Your significant success has been in building a cohesive team of enthusiastic leaders who believe that only the best is good enough for your pupils. They are committed to your vision, and have a refreshing optimism and drive. New staff spoke of the 'fantastic welcome and excellent induction' they received on joining Harper Green. A newly qualified English teacher has seized the opportunity of introducing a young writer's club; just one example of the energy and will to make a difference that epitomises the school.

Governance has improved. Governors welcome the high-quality, reliable data to which they now have access that covers the key aspects of the school's life and enables them to ask challenging questions. Governance was reconstituted prior to the last inspection and a joint executive board was established to steer the school strategically. There is an effective relationship between this board and the school's local governing body. Governors are aware that the school's website does not currently contain all the information that is required and are taking urgent action to

remedy this. A review of the school's spending of the pupil premium (additional government funding) was required following the school's last inspection. Governors have commissioned this review and it is scheduled for completion in April 2016.

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 ongoing transformation of this school, begun before the last section 5 inspection, is due to its highly effective partnership with Mount St Joseph, the national support school that also serves the community of Farnworth. You currently lead both schools and have been able to develop robust practices through a coaching programme and increasing the sharing of expertise across the two schools. This partnership working has included the provision of well-structured and effective leadership programmes to develop the skills of teachers to drive and sustain improvement. The strength of the partnership has greatly developed capacity for improvement at Harper Green, without detriment to Mount St Joseph.

The local authority makes a positive contribution to the school's development through the challenge offered by the school improvement partner, and through its presence on the joint executive board that holds governors and leaders to account to raise standards.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Bolton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Shirley Gornall
Her Majesty's Inspector