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Alison Waite
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Waite

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hilltop Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 11 March 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 September 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 held meetings with you, the deputy headteacher and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. I met the Chair of the Governing Body and one other member of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with a group of pupils. I conducted telephone conversations with a consultant whose services the school uses, and a headteacher of a local school who is providing support. We visited a number of lessons together to observe pupils' learning and to look at their books. I evaluated the school improvement plan. I also scrutinised the school's records of recruitment checks on staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have appointed a new subject leader for English. You have also employed an additional learning mentor. Plans have been approved for the building of an additional classroom which is required from September 2016.

Main findings

Your improvement plan is very well written and rightly identifies key actions which aim to secure improvement during this academic year. It is clear who will lead each improvement initiative and how you plan to evaluate and report to the governing body on the impact of these actions.

As you had predicted, pupils' attainment at the end of Year 6 dipped in 2015; you showed me the performance data to explain this and to show the current trend of improvement across the school. You have rightly focused on improving the quality of teaching across the school and on ensuring that teachers have high expectations of their pupils. These improvements are reflected in pupils' more rapid progress. Your current information for pupils in Years 3 to 6 indicates that all pupils, including the few disadvantaged pupils in the school and those with special educational needs or disability, are making better progress than previously.

You acknowledge the importance of ensuring the accuracy of your assessments of pupils' progress. You continue to assess the attainment of pupils as they enter your school to establish a reliable starting point from which you are able to measure the progress they make. You have adopted a system of monitoring progress against age-related expectations and this is becoming established. Pupils understood how this system operates and were able to tell me what they can do well, and what they need to do to improve. You are ensuring greater accuracy of your assessments by working in collaboration with other schools in the area so that you can moderate each other's judgements of pupils' progress.

Your two recently appointed subject leaders for English and mathematics have quickly identified what needs to be done to drive improvement further. They have each produced a detailed self-evaluation of their subject's performance and have identified a range of strategies to tackle previous weaknesses. The leader of mathematics rightly identified that less able pupils were not making enough progress and has chosen to reorganise teaching groups in Years 3 to 5 with the aim of eradicating any low expectations of these pupils on the part of their teachers. Observations carried out by the school's leaders demonstrate that this action has had an impact and these pupils are now aspiring to attempt more challenging tasks. Similarly, the new leader for English has ensured that grammar, punctuation and spelling are promoted more widely than previously across all subjects; my scrutiny of pupils' books shows that pupils are now applying these skills more regularly.

Phonics is now being taught more effectively. This has been helped by working closely with a school where phonics is taught particularly well. Teachers and teaching assistants have received valuable training on phonics which has helped them to improve their practice in this area.

My visits to lessons support your view that improvements in the quality of teaching are having an impact on pupils' progress. I saw consistent use of your system where pupils select a task labelled as 'challenge', 'extreme challenge' or 'ultimate challenge'. I also observed higher attaining pupils being taught separately at the start of a lesson as they did not need to go through the same material as their classmates in preparation for the main activity. More and more pupils are adopting an 'I can do' attitude. You are considering carefully how you spend your pupil premium funding to close the gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others in the school. For example, your mathematics club, targeted at disadvantaged girls in Years 4 to 6, has improved their resilience and perseverance to succeed.

Members of the governing body have a range of skills to help them challenge and support the school. They have streamlined the structure of their meetings to move away from a large number of sub-committees to three full meetings of the governing body each term. Governors are also linked to different classes, and they conduct scheduled visits to review the impact of the school's planned actions. These visits are followed up by notes of visit and are reported to the full governing body.

External support

You have brokered the support of a number of specialists to monitor the work of the school and its implementation of your action plan. An external consultant has worked closely with the school's senior leaders to ensure that they act swiftly on the findings of the previous inspection. For example, her work scrutiny shows that the revised school marking policy is being successfully implemented. The headteacher of a local school has provided well-targeted training on how to assess pupils' work and develop their writing skills. Teachers and teaching assistants have also benefited from attending this school to observe effective teaching. A representative from the local authority has worked well with the new leader of English to ensure her action plan is sharply focused on improving pupils' outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Essex.

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector