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Mrs Sarah Lansley
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Lansley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Cavendish School

Following my visit to your school on 14 October 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 May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- ensure that the high expectations, including those of how well students can write, set by senior and middle leaders are rigorously enforced by teachers across all subjects
- provide greater challenge in lessons for the most-able students
- accelerate the pace of improvement by including precise and ambitious milestones in your plans to ensure that leaders, including governors, can hold staff rigorously to account for the standard of education provided.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, senior and middle leaders, three members of the governing body, students from a range of year groups and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I scrutinised a range of documents, including parent surveys, minutes of meetings and improvement plans. I also conducted a scrutiny of the work of students in Years 7 to 11. An opportunity to walk around the school with you enabled me to see students at work in lessons.

Context

Since the last inspection, an assistant headteacher with responsibility for science has been appointed and the curriculum leader for English has been seconded to the senior leadership team. There have been new appointments at middle leadership level to the posts of curriculum leader for enterprise and that of curriculum leader for modern foreign languages. A review of governance has also taken place.

Main findings

You have quickly and successfully developed an ethos of trust and high expectations. As a consequence, staff morale is high and students are increasingly proud of their school. Students speak warmly of the improvements in teaching, feedback and rewards that you have put in place. Recent parent surveys reflect an increasing confidence in the school and the work that it is doing.

You and your governors have taken decisive action to strengthen the leadership and management throughout the school. Systems are in place to hold subject leaders to account for the outcomes achieved in each subject. In turn, curriculum leaders are increasingly confident in their judgements about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their subject areas. You have introduced a comprehensive programme of training to support their development and that of other teachers.

You monitor the quality of teaching closely and leaders are taking prompt action to improve the standards of teaching. You have not shied away from holding difficult conversations, and the quality of teaching is improving. Fourteen new teachers joined the school this year and you are working hard to make sure that the school's ethos is fully understood by each of them.

Visits to lessons confirmed that your work to raise expectations of what students can achieve is having an impact in the classroom. Growth targets (higher targets set for each student) are increasingly understood by students and teachers. However, these targets are not consistently applied; this is limiting their impact on raising standards and accelerating progress in some subjects. In one class visited, targets set for the most able were lower than the level of work that students were completing.

You have set high expectations of how students present their work and this was evident in some of the classrooms visited. More work needs to be done to ensure that these standards are rigorously applied by all staff and students.

Students in science lessons have responded well to the wider range of practical activities being provided, working with enthusiasm and good humour. They spoke of their enjoyment of the subject and the wider range of tasks that they were being expected to complete. There is also evidence of the increased focus upon literacy and extended writing, but this is not implemented in all lessons across the school and expectations of what some students are able to write are too low.

Standards rose last year but were still below national averages. Current information on achievement indicates that Year 11 outcomes will again rise in 2016, but work remains to be done to ensure that higher proportions of students make the progress of which they are capable. You have put in place a comprehensive programme of support for students at risk of underachievement. This includes mentoring and subject-specific intervention sessions. Students speak positively about how this programme is helping them make more progress. However, some of the most-able students feel that they can be stretched further. Evidence seen in school indicates that students in other years are making improved progress.

Your senior team and other staff are taking effective action to improve the attendance of disadvantaged students. The proactive and innovative approaches are leading to falls in absence. The students spoken with explained that they enjoy coming to school.

Governors are well placed to support and challenge you in your work. Acting on the recommendations of the review of governance, they have developed a sharper focus on the outcomes for all students and groups of students. Governors are assured of the accuracy of the information that is provided as it is externally validated. They know what needs to be done and are involved in the development and monitoring of the school improvement plans. These plans now need more precision and, in some areas, more ambitious milestones, so that the school improves at the pace required.

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 is working closely with a teaching school alliance as well as other partners. Several staff have benefited from the support offered to develop their teaching and leadership skills. The local authority commissions effective support for the school that reflects and meets the school's needs. It has brokered the support of

a national leader of education (NLE) to assist you with your school improvement work.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector