

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr D Lee-Allan
Headteacher
Stowmarket High School
Onehouse Road
Stowmarket
Suffolk
IP14 1QR

Dear Mr Lee-Allan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stowmarket High School

Following my visit to your school on 18 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. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in September 2015, 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- validate the robustness of your current assessment information by matching it with the findings gained from your lesson monitoring and scrutiny of the quality and quantity of work in pupils' books across a range of subjects.
- ensure that teachers have the information they need about the pupils they teach who have special educational needs or disability to enable them to apply suitable, day-to-day strategies in lessons to help them learn.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and your senior leaders, a group of pupils, two members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a representative of the Hackney Learning Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. An opportunity to walk the school with one of your senior leaders enabled me to see pupils at work in lessons.

Context

Since the last inspection, you have promoted a number of staff into your leadership team to increase the school's capacity to improve. The governing body has been restructured to increase its effectiveness and provide further support and challenge for you and your staff.

Main findings

- You have rightly focused your efforts on tackling the school's long-standing budgetary issues and strengthening your leadership team. Roles and responsibilities are much clearer. Some of these appointments are quite new and have not had sufficient time to demonstrate their full impact.
- The school improvement plan has been amended to include the issues raised in the last inspection. This plan places a greater emphasis on the performance of disadvantaged pupils. All staff are expected to know who these pupils are, where they sit in their lessons and make suitable provision for them. The creation of an 'umbrella group' of disadvantaged pupils and those whose circumstances have made them the most vulnerable is raising the profile of this group. One of your associate headteachers has full responsibility for overseeing their progress and welfare.
- More frequent assessments of pupils' progress and closer analysis of these data are providing you with a clearer indication of how well all of them are doing. This is also enabling you to monitor the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, particularly those in Years 10 and 11, to identify which of them are at risk of underachieving or require additional support. Your deputy headteacher has assumed responsibility for managing assessment information. This is helping to identify more clearly the performance of all pupils. However, some improvements indicated in the latest assessment information are not fully substantiated by the quality and quantity of work in pupils' books.

- The validity and robustness of these data have not been fully tested to make sure that they give you and your governors an accurate view of the improvements being made.
- You have taken tough decisions when the quality of teaching has fallen short of your expectations. Procedures to manage the performance of all staff are in place and you intend to sharpen their targets so that all staff are held fully accountable for securing improvements. Your own monitoring shows that teaching is getting better due to the increased amount of professional development and training provided for staff, and the routine monitoring of lessons, led by your senior team.
- However, you also acknowledge that key weaknesses remain in the teaching and in the leadership and management of mathematics and science. This is compounded by persistent difficulties in recruiting new staff to fill vacancies in mathematics. In my meeting with pupils, some of them voiced their concerns about the lack of progress they are making in these subjects. Both subjects are under close scrutiny from you and your team, and staff are being held to account for making improvements. You aim to strengthen provision further this term by redeploying some staff from other subjects to support teaching in these areas.
- Similarly, you are raising expectations of the performance of the coordinator of pupils who have special educational needs or disability. An action plan has been put in place to help her to achieve this. Currently, the quality of information provided for teachers about these pupils does not enable them to apply suitable day-to-day strategies to help them learn. Also, checks are not made to see how effectively teachers adapt learning to meet the needs of these pupils. You are aware of this and have allocated one of your associate headteachers to support and manage the work of the coordinator in improving the provision and outcomes for these pupils.
- My learning walk confirmed your views, and those expressed in the last inspection report, that teaching remains inconsistent across subjects. Most teachers manage pupils' behaviour effectively by applying the school's revised policy and procedures. Marking of pupils' work is regular and usually provides them with clear feedback about how to improve their work. In an English lesson, the teacher's detailed subject knowledge enabled pupils to make steady progress. They showed some interest in their work but were not expected to make their own notes to ensure that they had information to refer to later in their learning. In mathematics, expectations of pupils are too low. A scrutiny of pupils' books showed an over-reliance on worksheets. Work is often left unfinished or poorly presented and, in some lessons, a minimal amount of work is done.

- In a science lesson, pupils were responding positively to the practical experiment they had completed, and were busily engaged in interpreting their findings. Good relations and effective management of behaviour were encouraging pupils to complete the task. However, the quality of work in some of their books is poor. There are no clear expectations of how pupils should use pens, pencils and rulers. Marking is regular, but does not correct common errors in their use of scientific language to help them improve their spelling.
- At the time of the last inspection, plans were in place to make the teaching of reading throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 much more systematic. This initiative continues, led by one of your senior leaders. Silent reading at the start of all lessons and during tutorials, the 'Lit programme' provided by the trust, and encouraging pupils to use the library are beginning to lead to some improvement. This needs accelerating further as reading for pleasure has a low profile among pupils.
- A team led by your assistant headteacher and a recently appointed manager are leading improvements in pupils' behaviour and attendance. Your records show that fewer pupils are removed from lessons compared with last year because teachers are taking responsibility for managing poor behaviour when it happens, to prevent it from disrupting the learning of others. Pupils feel that behaviour is managed well by most teachers, but identified a number of lessons where poor behaviour is not tackled as effectively as it should be.
- Attendance remains below average, but is improving. More frequent checks of pupils' absence and closer working with support services, parents and carers are demonstrating to pupils that regular absence is not tolerated and will be pursued fully. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is also improving as staff make more regular checks of their whereabouts and the reasons for their absence. Your pastoral leaders are contributing to this improving trend by following up concerns raised about attendance and behaviour with pupils and their parents or carers.
- The governing body has streamlined its committee structure to increase its support and challenge for you, and to continue to meet its statutory obligations. Governors have attended training brokered by the local authority to increase their effectiveness. They have a realistic view of the school's current performance and the actions needed to get it to become good. They are managing the school's finances carefully to resolve the significant budget deficit you inherited when you took up your post, and to ease the constraints this places on you in your efforts to secure improvement. You and your governors recognise the essential work needed to strengthen significantly provision in key subjects over the next four terms to ensure that the school is fully prepared for its re-inspection.

External support

You continue to work in partnership with the Hackney Learning Trust to improve the school's performance. In particular, you are embedding some of their teaching resources to promote literacy in the curriculum, and have commissioned trust leaders to evaluate the quality of teaching and leadership in the school, and report their findings. This is providing an enhanced level of support and further challenge for you and your staff.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector