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Nicola Redhead
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Dear Ms Redhead

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Reach School

Following my visit to your school on 22 April 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 April 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to make sure that:

- all teachers provide verbal and written feedback that helps pupils improve their work and make faster progress
- pupils have more opportunities to write at length and have the skills to proofread and edit their work
- the effectiveness of the six-week Year 9 programme is evaluated in terms of how it improves the pupils' behaviour, attendance and attitudes to learning when they return to their home school
- all pupils have sufficient opportunities to problem solve and reason mathematically
- the 'professional predicted grade' (the target grade pupils are set when they enter the school) is challenging and ambitious

- the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent (missing 10% of school time) is quickly reduced and closes the gap when compared to all schools nationally.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher and two governors including the chair of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with other school leaders and staff. The deputy headteacher showed me around the school and we observed pupils' learning in English, science and mathematics. During these observations I looked at their work and talked to the pupils about their learning. I looked at a range of documents including the school's self-evaluation form and subsequent action plan. I scrutinised the information you provided about pupils' current progress, attendance and behaviour. A brief scrutiny of the school's safeguarding arrangements was also undertaken.

Context

Since the previous inspection three members of staff have left the school and been replaced. You have created two new posts and appointed staff to these positions. They include a new inclusion leader who oversees pupils' behaviour and attendance and an assistant challenge instructor who supports the challenge day activities. A new chair of the governing body has been appointed since the previous inspection.

Main findings

You and school leaders and governors wasted no time in addressing the issues identified at the previous inspection. For example, within a week of the inspection you reviewed and modified the school timetable to make sure that all pupils receive 25 hours of learning time and experience all assemblies and other school activities. All pupils study at least seven GCSE subjects. They follow a compulsory programme that includes English, English literature, mathematics, science and personal and social education. In addition, they have a choice of two further subjects chosen from art, catering, health and social care and sports studies. Pupils also have opportunities to study level 1 and level 2 courses at off-site training venues. These courses include hair and beauty, motor vehicle maintenance, horticulture, construction and child care. Pupils experience other activities such as rock climbing, hill walking and board sailing through the 'challenge days'. Pupils I spoke to told me that these activities help develop their confidence and self-esteem. A number of pupils told me that their attendance has improved since joining the school as they enjoy their learning and are keen not to miss out on the many and varied activities. Current attendance figures show that the gap between the school average and the national average is closing. However, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent (missing 10% of school time) remains stubbornly high.

The school provides a full-time six week programme for Year 9 pupils who are experiencing difficulties in their home school. School leaders suggest that this programme helps pupils to modify their behaviour and improve their attendance and attitudes to learning. However, school leaders have not ensured that their assessments are accurate as they have not thoroughly and routinely evaluated the effectiveness of this programme.

You have challenged underperformance and begun to raise staff's expectations of what pupils can achieve. As a result, some staff have left the school. The work in pupils' books shows that staff have improved their performance. All staff have set pupils a 'professional predicted grade' or target grade. However, you accept that these target grades do not always reflect pupils' true abilities or challenge pupils to be ambitious.

You identify the most-able pupils when they join Reach. As with other pupils in the school, the most-able pupils have had a disrupted education and have not, in the past, made the progress expected of them. You ensure that teachers provide appropriate and challenging learning activities that help the most-able pupils to consolidate and develop their skills and abilities. As a result, the majority of the most-able pupils are now achieving well.

Staff are using the information they have about what pupils know and can do to plan and set appropriate and suitable work that meets pupils' needs. As a consequence, the majority of pupils are now doing well in a range of subjects. However, you accept that a small minority of staff do not consistently follow the school's marking and assessment policy.

Pupils start at the school with reading and writing skills that are well below those expected for their age. School leaders are improving the teaching of reading and writing through appropriate and effective training. As a result, pupils are more enthusiastic about reading and voluntarily read a range of books, magazines and newspapers. Information provided by the school shows that pupils' reading skills are developing quickly as a result. Leaders are also making sure that pupils are developing their writing skills. However, the work in pupils' books shows that they do not have sufficient opportunities to write at length or to develop the skills necessary to proofread and edit their own work.

The mathematics subject specialists from schools in the South Area Network have provided effective training to develop the quality of mathematics teaching and pupils' ability to apply their numeracy skills in a range of subjects. As a result, pupils' mathematical knowledge and understanding is improving. However, you and the mathematics subject leader recognise that pupils have insufficient opportunities to solve increasingly difficult problems and to explain how they arrived at their answer.

The governing body works effectively with school leaders and you describe their support as 'fantastic'. They check the work of the school frequently and know the

school's strengths and areas for improvement. They are quick to address weaknesses. Governors are ambitious for the school. They have an impressive range of skills and expertise that enables them to provide backing, guidance and challenge in equal measure.

External support

You are using the expertise and resources of the South Area Network schools to address the areas for improvement more quickly. The school is making rapid progress because you and the network schools work together effectively. For example, visits to the network schools have helped teachers to see, share and implement effective practice.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries

Her Majesty's Inspector