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Mrs Jane Harris
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Harris

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Balaam Wood School

Following my visit to your school on 8 July 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 January 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in November 2013, 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:

- ensure that all actions contained in improvement plans are evaluated by judging the impact they have had, rather than simply whether they have been completed
- review the curriculum in key stage 3 to improve provision for design technology

- improve the attendance of the minority of pupils who are regularly absent from school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and other leaders and a group of governors, including the chair of governors, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement action plan was evaluated, as were other plans, minutes of governing body meetings and the school's information about pupils' attainment. I also accompanied a deputy headteacher on brief visits to lessons, where we talked to pupils and looked at their books.

Context

Since the inspection in January 2016, one teacher and two members of the support staff have left the school. One learning mentor has joined the school. Three parents have joined the governing body.

You are due to leave the school at the end of term and are to be replaced by an acting headteacher, who is a current deputy headteacher. The school's other deputy headteacher will become an 'associate headteacher' and four current middle leaders will join an extended senior leadership team. Governors have secured an associate consultant who will work in the school for two days each week, supporting the senior team.

A new head of science, two science teachers, two English teachers and a Spanish teacher will join the school in September 2016.

The school has spaces for pupils in all year groups. However, the number of pupils in the school is set to rise as small cohorts leave the school and are replaced with much larger ones. For example, 42 pupils have just left Year 11 and will be replaced by 75 pupils in Year 7 in September 2016.

Main findings

Leaders and governors have been working hard to improve Balaam Wood and have seen standards rise considerably over recent years. Despite some disappointment with the outcomes of the inspection of January 2016, leaders and governors have reacted energetically and with a renewed determination to see the school judged as 'good' at its next inspection. They have constructed comprehensive and detailed action plans that address all areas for improvement contained in the inspection report. The plans are simple, clear and well focused around four key priorities which reflect one overarching aim of 'a relentless focus on improving teaching and students' learning and progress'. Senior staff and governors regularly monitor and evaluate the specific and appropriate actions contained in the plans. However, their

evaluations would be strengthened by a sharper focus on the impact that actions have had, rather than simply whether an action has taken place.

Leaders are determined to improve teaching. A considerable amount of training has already taken place, and more is planned. Some training has focused on whole-school issues such as questioning, challenge and feedback, and leaders' checks indicate that these areas are improving as a result. Other training has been given to individuals and departments to strengthen subject knowledge, for example in science, mathematics and design technology. The school has a higher proportion of subject specialist teachers now than when it was last inspected and by September 2016 leaders anticipate that it will be fully staffed with specialist teachers in all departments, including the science department.

Leaders have taken a range of actions to reduce low-level disruption in lessons. They have revised the school's 'getting it right' policy, and have relaunched it to pupils and parents. All staff have been trained in dealing with low-level disruption, with some receiving additional support to help them ensure that pupils do not misbehave in lessons. School records indicate that behaviour in lessons has improved this year and my brief visits to classes found calm lessons where pupils behaved well and focused on their work.

Leaders have carried out an initial review of the curriculum and changes are planned to take effect from September 2016. These include the addition of a 'triple science' pathway for some pupils, revised key stage 4 options and additional teaching time for design technology in key stage 3. The recent addition of a 'literacy timetable' for some pupils in Years 7 and 8 has already improved these pupils' reading. However, the key stage 3 design technology curriculum remains narrow, with little provision for pupils to study food or resistant materials.

The school's data systems provide leaders and teachers with up-to-date assessment information about pupils and groups of pupils in all year groups. This information is being used increasingly well by teachers to plan lessons that are now better matched to pupils' abilities. It also enables leaders to identify pupils who are falling behind and then give them extra help to catch up. Current projections for 2016 indicate that outcomes will rise across most subjects, including science.

Middle leaders share senior leaders' determination to see standards rise. They are increasingly driving improvement in teaching in their subjects, supported by senior leaders. Their roles have been successfully developed by senior leaders and they particularly benefit from training and networking opportunities that they access through the Oaks Collegiate.

Pupils' attendance is a concern. While most pupils attend school regularly, a small but significant minority do not. This means that the overall attendance of pupils has not improved this year, and it remains below the national average for secondary schools.

Governors know the school well, including its strengths and weaknesses. They bring considerable expertise to the school and are effective in holding leaders to account for the school's performance. Leaders provide governors with high-quality information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance, and governors understand this data well. When considering improvement plans, governors' scrutiny would benefit from a sharper focus on the impact that actions have had.

External support

Leaders access a wide range of effective external support from the Oaks Collegiate. This is a group of 10 local schools which was formed with the aim of 'working together in partnership to develop best practice and improve the quality of learning in all the Oaks schools'. Examples of support accessed through the Oaks Collegiate include the following:

- Subject-based 'action groups' have supported subject leaders' development of learning schemes and their efforts to improve the accuracy of teachers' assessments.
- Several middle and senior leaders have received specific leadership training that has made them more effective in their roles.
- A review of the science department helped leaders to decide priorities for improvement.
- Two specialist leaders of education (SLEs) have helped the information and communications technology and design technology departments to develop their schemes of learning in the light of national curriculum changes.

Leaders have recently received support from the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) through an adviser who supports senior and middle leaders. This has helped leaders to better present assessment information and to review aspects of the curriculum.

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

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector