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Ms Wendy Conaghan
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Dear Ms Conaghan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Kingsdown School

Following my visit to your school on 30 September 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 February 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 February 2016, 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 in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils so that they make progress comparable with their peers
- create an aspirational culture in which all pupils strive to achieve their full potential.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, pupils, the governing body, middle leaders and a representative of the River Learning Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan, action plans to address areas for improvement from the last inspection and the school's own self-evaluation were evaluated. In addition, observations of learning were undertaken with the headteacher, along with scrutiny of pupils' work during this activity.

Context

Since the last inspection, the senior leadership team has been restructured and now consists of fewer staff. This has allowed leaders to build capacity at middle leadership level and develop the director of learning role. Fifteen new teaching staff started at the school in September 2016, filling posts in a range of subjects. A new chair of the governing body has been appointed since the last inspection. The school is in the process of joining the River Learning Trust and is currently going through due diligence.

Main findings

You, other school leaders and governors are clear about the improvements that are needed in order for the school to become good. Having fully accepted the findings of the last inspection, the action plans produced by leaders in response focus precisely on the identified areas for improvement. These plans have provided leaders with direction and enabled staff to implement actions that are steadily improving the quality of teaching and pupils' behaviour. Leaders now have higher, more demanding expectations of staff. The process to manage their performance is being used effectively to ensure that the best staff are in place to improve the quality of teaching. You have had a particular focus on the mathematics and modern foreign languages departments in this regard. Recently appointed, well-trained teachers are now providing greater stability and consistency in these subjects.

Middle leadership has been strengthened because you have invested in the director of learning role. Along with subject leaders and lead practitioners, these leaders have been empowered to take on more responsibility for the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. They are responding to this challenge enthusiastically, working collaboratively to ensure that their work flows from an accurate understanding of assessment information. They have a comprehensive understanding of the progress of different groups of pupils and use this knowledge to tailor appropriate intervention to pupils' needs. However, they rightly acknowledge that disadvantaged pupils in the higher years are not making progress comparable with their peers in some subjects.

Teaching is improving across subjects as a result of the actions staff are implementing to improve practice. It is also improving as a result of more robust monitoring by middle leaders. Teachers are planning interesting tasks that more accurately suit pupils' abilities and interests. Consequently, they are more engaged in their learning. One pupil who spoke to an inspector said, 'Lessons used to be repetitive but now we're learning better things.' Pupils report that they are finding work more challenging than previously and are keen to try the more difficult extension tasks when offered. When pupils respond to the feedback they receive from their teachers, in line with the school's policy, this often generates further challenge. This is because, in the most effective cases, pupils are required to redraft and refine work they have already crafted in light of teachers' guidance. This system of feedback and response is used widely and consistently across subjects, but the degree to which it facilitates rapid progress and greater challenge varies. As a result of better teaching, achievement is rising, notably in English and mathematics.

Pupils are well behaved in their lessons. They listen attentively, focus on the task in hand and follow the instructions of staff. No low-level disruption was observed during the inspection. Work in books is well presented and pupils take pride in their work. However, pupils in the upper years do not exhibit a great enthusiasm for learning or intellectual curiosity. Outside lessons and around the school site pupils behave in an orderly and considerate way. They treat the site well so that the bright and vibrant displays around the school remain free from damage and retain their freshness.

Governors are now supporting school leaders effectively. This is because they understand the strategic importance of their role and candidly acknowledge that they were not sufficiently strategic at the time of the last inspection. Consequently, governors now demand succinct information that provides them with what they need to know and allows them to ask the right questions. Governors, therefore, have an accurate understanding of the school's current areas for development stemming from the last inspection. They are in no doubt that improving the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is a key priority. They now provide you and other leaders with more effective challenge. This is because they triangulate information provided by leaders with other external sources of information. For example, reports from the school improvement adviser and representatives from the River Learning Trust help to validate leaders' assessments.

External support

The school is receiving strong support from the River Learning Trust. The chief executive is working closely with you to improve the quality of teaching and middle leadership. Teachers from other high-performing schools in the trust have provided training and shared their expertise with school staff. This has been enthusiastically received by staff so that they are feeling re-energised and 'up for the challenge'.

Leaders are aware of the value of harvesting this optimism in order for the school to move forward rapidly. You are also aware from your work with the trust of the importance of establishing a culture in the school which champions high aspiration and cultivates an 'anything is possible' attitude in pupils. You know that there is further work to do here and that it will take time to achieve. You are also aware, however, that this is the foundation on which all other work to improve teaching and raise achievement must be built.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector