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Dear Allan Osborne

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Epping St John's Church of England VC School

Following my visit to your school on 3 October 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 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:

- improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so it is consistently good and enables pupils of all abilities to catch up and so make the progress of which they are capable, especially in the case of current Year 11 pupils
- ensure that teachers are equipped with, and confident in applying, effective strategies to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in each subject
- ensure that those teachers who do not apply school policies on assessment and feedback do so.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, five middle leaders, a group of 15 pupils, two members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a group made up of five teachers and one co-educator (the school's name for members of support staff), to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. A range of documentation was evaluated, including the school's rapid improvement plans, and documents relating to safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and achievement. During two learning walks with you, I observed pupils at work in their lessons. I also held informal discussions with pupils at breaktime and during lesson change-over.

Context

In the time since the previous inspection, you have made significant alterations to the senior leadership team. You have appointed five new members to this team, to replace those leaders who have left. You have also restructured the school's middle leadership. There are now six directors of learning (curriculum leaders) in post, along with six learning leaders (pastoral leaders). In this time, 17 teachers have left the school and 21 have arrived.

Main findings

- In your two terms at the school, you have established high expectations and correctly introduced a sense of urgency to improving the school. You have successfully created a culture in which the needs of the pupils are uppermost in adults' thoughts. Staff morale is high and there is a palpable commitment to improvement. Staff informed me that issues are tackled 'head on' and concerns that need addressing 'are not ignored'. You have gone a long way towards creating the positive environment in which learning can thrive. Your enthusiasm and dedication have not gone unnoticed by pupils. One pupil told me that 'the headteacher is so enthusiastic about our learning that we want to do well for him'. His peers agreed.
- You have set out your priorities in well-focused 'rapid improvement plans'. You correctly identified the need to improve the quality of leadership and management at the school to enable you to achieve these priorities within your ambitious timescales. Evidence indicates that you are being successful in doing so. You have delegated responsibility for important aspects of leadership to the recently appointed members of the senior team. These senior leaders know what needs to be done and have set about their work with clarity and enthusiasm. This has already brought an added momentum in bringing about the changes necessary for the school to improve. This is something that pupils and teachers already appreciate. The sentiments demonstrated by one pupil, that 'school is more organised', and by a teacher who told me there is a clarity of direction, were echoed in many discussions during the course of this monitoring inspection.

- There is a transparent accountability throughout the school. This has come about as a result of your restructure of the middle leadership system and the robust line management you have introduced. Adults are clearly held responsible for the quality of education provided, be it through the skilful questioning by governors, or through effective line management by senior leaders. This is welcomed by many staff across the school and is sharpening the focus upon the changes that need to be made.
- Published examination results demonstrate that key stage 4 outcomes in 2016 were not good enough. This was especially the case in mathematics. While Year 11 pupils did make accelerated progress between January and June, the changes introduced did not have time to enable those pupils to make up for a legacy of poor and disrupted teaching. You have taken swift action to make sure that this is not repeated. Governors understand the urgency of this work and have supported you well. For example, they have provided resources to enable you to appoint additional mathematics teachers as part of your strategy to improve achievement in this subject. In addition, you provide many additional learning opportunities for pupils such as lunchtime, after-school and holiday lessons. While pupils appreciate these activities and are making better progress across each year group, there is still much work to be done to ensure that pupils in Year 11 make up for gaps in their knowledge brought about by disrupted learning in the past. You know that the pace of change needs to be maintained as many challenges remain for the school to be judged good at its next section 5 inspection.
- You have an accurate understanding of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and have been courageous in challenging practice that is not good enough. This has led to an improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in many areas of the school. The number of temporary teachers working in the school has been considerably reduced. Pupils, who now have higher expectations of their teachers and themselves, told me that they enjoy their lessons and are able to learn more effectively in many subjects. They want all teachers to be 'as good as the best' and say that this is not yet the case. Inspection evidence supports their views. For example, in mathematics, while lessons are calm and often include learning that is well matched to the abilities of the pupils, this is not consistently the case. In some classes, the work set is too easy for the pupils. It is testament to the pupils' determination to learn that, when this is the case, they remain focused upon the task. Similarly, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment remains variable in science.
- You have made clear your expectations of how teachers should assess, and then feedback upon, pupils' work. Where teachers meet these expectations, pupils respond well and know how to develop their skills and knowledge. A minority of teachers do not apply your policy as well as you expect them to. In these classes, pupils are less clear about what they have to do to achieve their targets, and make slower progress over time. Similarly, there are some teachers who still do not offer clear direction on how pupils should present

their work. As a result, some careless and scruffy work still goes unchallenged.

- Since the previous monitoring inspection you have carried out audits of several areas of the school's work. These have resulted in you making appropriate improvements. For example, there has been a swift change in the leadership of provision for disadvantaged pupils. There is now a well-focused strategy to help pupils overcome any barriers to their learning that may exist. These pupils rightly now have access to the same curriculum opportunities as their peers. School evidence demonstrates that in Years 8 to 10, these pupils are making improved progress. However, this is less evident for those in Year 11 and you have correctly made this a priority area for the school. You are also acting upon the accurate findings of an external review into the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. These pupils' attendance and achievement are showing signs of improvement as a result.
- Pupils move around the school calmly and with good humour. Relationships around the school are good natured and respectful. Behaviour in lessons is much improved. The low-level disruption evident in the past has significantly reduced. Pupils attribute this to teachers' higher expectations, better teaching and more consistent application of school policies. In the words of one pupil, 'we know what is right and what is wrong now'. As a result of your successful approach to improving pupils' behaviour, the number of exclusions has been dramatically reduced. Pupils also explained that their good behaviour is now clearly recognised. As one pupil told me, 'teachers are now seeing the good in us', something that several others also commented upon. This ethos is contributing to a harmonious, purposeful school environment.
- Pupils told me that they feel safe in school and put this down to improved pupils' behaviour and the recent good work of the senior team. Pupils are able to articulate the strategies they may use to keep themselves safe, for example when online. While they feel well prepared for life in modern Britain, they would welcome more information to help them to develop life skills, such as dealing with personal finances. Pupils know what bullying is and explain that it is not a frequent occurrence at their school. Were it to occur, pupils commented that adults would deal with this well. As a result of appropriate training, adults are alert to each aspect of their safeguarding responsibilities, including the government's 'Prevent' duty. Adults know what to do if they have concerns about the well-being of a child and can explain why this is the correct course of action to take.

External support

You are keen to draw upon a wide range of expertise to ensure that the school improves quickly and you have proactively sought the support of external agencies. You have heeded the good advice from the local authority officers who have carried out audits of safeguarding and provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Similarly, through the work of a national leader of

education, you have been able to make appropriate plans to improve provision in mathematics and also that for disadvantaged pupils across the school. You also seek external validation of teachers' and leaders' assessment of the progress that pupils make. You and your leaders now have an accurate understanding of the levels of achievement in the school.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Chelmsford and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector