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Mrs Sarah Lansley  
Headteacher  
The Cavendish School  
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Dear Mrs Lansley

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection of The Cavendish School**

Following my visit to your school on 6 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 May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection that took place in June 2013, the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are not 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 pupils' writing across the curriculum
- equip teachers and support staff with the necessary strategies to improve outcomes for all groups of pupils, including the disadvantaged and the most able
- improve outcomes in English, by ensuring that this department and its many new staff have the necessary support to develop high-quality teaching, learning and assessment
- make sure that all leaders regularly and frequently evaluate the impact of their work so that they can target resources more effectively towards improvement.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, five middle leaders, five governors, a group made up of four teachers and two support staff, a group of 20 pupils and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. Documents relating to safeguarding pupils, improvement planning, pupils' attendance and achievement, and the monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment were evaluated. During my tour of the school with you, I observed pupils at work in their lessons.

## **Main findings**

The 12 months since the previous monitoring inspection have been difficult ones for The Cavendish School. You are a highly effective headteacher, taking appropriate action to improve the school, and your unexpected absence left the senior team depleted. At a time when improvements were fragile and the school needed support, the local authority and governing body did not effectively coordinate their efforts to ensure that this support was as cohesive or timely as it needed to be. As a result, until the summer term, conscientious leaders who stepped up to lead the school did not have access to the appropriate depth of resources to make the necessary rapid improvements. One leader commented, 'We were not progressing at the rate that we wanted to'. Inspection evidence supports this view. The clear momentum of improvement noted on the previous inspection was not maintained and, in 2016, key stage 4 outcomes were not good enough. School leaders acknowledge that these outcomes were some way below their predictions and the school's own targets. Leaders also recognise that a significant improvement in pupils' outcomes in many subjects across key stages 3 and 4 is required in order for the school to be judged good at its next inspection. Outcomes in the sixth form, where there is decisive leadership and an ethos of high expectation, are impressive.

The inspection in May 2015 identified that the provision for the most able pupils needed improvement. The actions taken by school leaders have not had sufficient impact, and these pupils did not achieve as well as they could have in their public examinations in 2016. Pupils explained that while they are now challenged in many subjects, this is not consistently the case. Inspection evidence supports their view.

Where expectations are high, the most able pupils demonstrate what they are capable of achieving. This was clearly seen in some key stage 3 English and humanities lessons and in pupils' books, but was not evident in other classes. Consequently, provision for the most able pupils remains an area for improvement.

School leaders concede that their work to improve the provision for disadvantaged pupils did not have sufficient impact on their achievements in 2016. As a result, the difference between their achievement and that of pupils nationally was too wide. Inspection evidence demonstrates that disadvantaged pupils in Years 7 to 9 are making better progress. However, there is still significant work to be done to enable

disadvantaged pupils in key stage 4 to catch up with their peers. You have rightly identified this as a priority for the school.

In an area where teacher recruitment is challenging, pupils, teachers and leaders told me that there were too many staff changes over the past year, in particular in the key subject of science. This hampered efforts to secure the necessary improvements in pupils' progress. As a result, pupils' achievement in science in 2016 was low and some way below leaders' predictions. The staffing situation is now more stable and school evidence demonstrates that outcomes in science are improving. Pupils explained that they often enjoy learning in their science lessons and welcome the opportunities to carry out experiments.

Pupils' achievement in English has also not improved quickly enough. Leaders are now taking appropriate action to accelerate the pace of improvement in this subject. However, as many members of the English department are new and improvements remain fragile, it is too early to see the full impact of this work on pupils' achievement. Where there is stability of staffing, pupils' achievement is better, as is the case in French, physical education and music.

Despite the difficult recruitment climate, leaders have not been afraid to challenge teaching practice that is not good enough, and this is leading to an improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in this academic year. Teachers have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. Similarly, pupils have higher expectations of themselves, in particular those in key stage 3 and in the sixth form. Pupils have responded well to their teachers' insistence that work is better presented. More often than not, pupils present their work with care and demonstrate an increasing pride in what they do. Leaders have also been effective in improving the consistency of teachers' feedback on pupils' work. Where this is done in line with the school's policy, pupils are able to identify how to improve their work and are increasingly confident in carrying out these improvements.

The quality of pupils' writing across the curriculum remains too variable. Where pupils are provided with clear guidance and the opportunity to write at length, they do so well. However, these opportunities are not frequent enough to enable pupils of all abilities to develop their writing skills sufficiently. School leaders have made appropriate curriculum changes to provide more time for pupils to develop their literacy skills at key stage 3 and their science skills at key stage 4. As with many of these changes, it is too early to assess the sustained impact on pupils' achievement.

Leaders are taking effective action to bring about improvements in pupils' attendance. For almost all groups of pupils, attendance is rising and the proportions of those pupils who are persistently absent are falling. This is due to the careful monitoring and rapid actions of pastoral leaders and the attendance officer. Similarly, behaviour has continued to improve. The lessons visited on this monitoring inspection were characterised by good relationships and positive attitudes to learning. The majority of teachers understand, and consistently apply,

the school's behaviour management procedures. While many pupils welcome these improvements, they remain frustrated by the behaviour of a small number of their peers who do not share the majority's mature desire to learn.

Since you returned to your post on a full-time basis in September, you have not wasted any time in bringing about improvements. Expectations are higher and leaders are better directed. You have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and you are accurate in the candid assessment that the school is 'not where I wanted it to be' on the journey of improvement. There is a well-focused plan to bring about improvement. Staff morale, which had fallen, is much improved and teachers informed me that the clarity, drive and unity have returned to the school. They welcome the increased consistency and urgency to school improvement that you have reintroduced.

Middle and senior leaders have responded well to the clear direction you are setting for the work of school improvement with renewed purpose. While these leaders are taking swift action to bring about improvements in their areas of responsibility, some do not review the impact as clearly as they need to. Where this is done well, leaders make appropriate adjustments to their work. This is the case for the sixth form, modern languages and mathematics, and the quality of provision is good or improving. In other areas, the pace of improvement is less consistent.

The new, and highly experienced, chair of the governing body has a clear understanding of the actions that governors need to take to ensure that the school improves. She has already taken effective steps to make sure that the governing body is diligent in fulfilling each of its responsibilities with regard to finances and safeguarding.

### **External support**

The school has accessed a wide range of support from external agencies. The impact of this support has been variable. You have been careful to assess the impact of this work. You are selecting and targeting support where it is most needed and most effective. Rightly, this includes the support of the local authority for the subjects of English, science and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lucas  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**