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Mrs Christine Forsyth
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Forsyth

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Woodham Academy

Following my visit to your school on 27 January 2017, 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 March 2016. 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 recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the visit, I met you and your senior and middle leaders to discuss the actions taken to improve the school since the last inspection. I undertook a learning walk with you during which I observed pupils' learning and I looked at work in books and folders. I met a group of pupils to discuss their learning and any changes they had identified since the last inspection. I met the chair of the governing body and held a telephone conversation with the local authority school improvement partner. I examined the school improvement plan as well as other documents, including self-evaluation documents, subject reviews and assessment information on current progress and safeguarding documents. I also discussed the reviews of governance and the use of pupil premium funding.

Context

Since the last inspection, an assistant headteacher has been appointed with responsibilities for leading improvements in teaching and learning and establishing more robust monitoring procedures. Associate assistant headteachers have been co-opted to the leadership team to add additional leadership capacity. Changes have been made to the pastoral system, with heads of learning now overseeing pupils' welfare and academic progress. An expanded behaviour support team, led by the director of the sports academy, has specific responsibilities for pupils' behaviour. The school is in the process of appointing its own educational welfare officer to support attendance in response to changes in local authority arrangements.

Main findings

You and your governors have taken significant action to address the areas for improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. Leaders have introduced more robust systems to check on the quality of teaching and learning. A newly appointed assistant headteacher has developed systems which are aligning judgements on the quality of teaching in the classroom with ongoing reviews of pupils' work and progress over time. The subject leader for English has joined an expanded leadership team to moderate the quality and accuracy of assessment and develop new assessment systems at key stage 3. Middle leaders are now more actively involved in checking on the quality of teaching in their departments. Teaching cycles have been modified with the introduction of periods of time where pupils consolidate their learning and more rigorously address areas for improvement.

Senior leaders are balancing swift actions required to lead change alongside longer term developments to improve the quality of teaching and learning. You have sought to diagnose performance more assiduously by commissioning reviews of key aspects of the school's work. A two-day review of teaching in mathematics has contributed to changes in schemes of work and the teaching cycle. Similar activities have led to additional support in separate sciences. A new programme of professional development is leading to a renewed focus on improving the quality of teaching, while visits to other schools have given teachers wider access to good practice in teaching, assessment and leadership.

You have strengthened tracking systems. Pupils' progress is measured regularly, with each year group reviewed in separate weeks to ensure that progress is evenly measured across all year groups. Subject leaders have weekly review meetings with their line managers to review current progress and the progress of key groups of pupils. Middle leaders carry out external moderation to check that assessment is accurate. They are tracking the performance of disadvantaged pupils more carefully. As a result of these changes, performance management structures are stronger and teachers are held more firmly to account for pupils' progress.

Senior leaders have modified the systems for behaviour management. An expanded behaviour support team, under the guidance of the director of Woodham Sports Academy, addresses day-to-day behaviour issues and provides support for pupils. This enables progress leaders to focus more specifically upon pupils' academic progress and pastoral welfare. New procedures for pupils to line up create a more orderly start to the day and a readiness for the learning ahead. Teachers feel that behaviour around the school is much better and pupils agree. On inspection, an orderly atmosphere was evident in lessons and at the start of the day. However, behaviour at afternoon changeover was louder and more boisterous, with some pupils walking across borders and muddy grassed areas.

Leaders have attempted to fortify systems to improve aspects of attendance although this remains a challenge. A recent review of local authority attendance support services has affected the pace of improvement. The school has now advertised for its own educational welfare officer to directly support and challenge pupils with significant attendance issues. This is a key priority as there remain groups of pupils who are significantly disadvantaged by low levels of attendance and persistent absence.

Pupils feel that behaviour at school has improved since the last inspection and that they are able to focus more effectively upon their learning. They now receive more effective feedback and tailored support that are helping them to make better progress. However, pupils also felt that variance remained in teachers' actions to check their understanding in lessons and that they were not consistently challenged in all subjects.

Governors have responded to the review of governance by altering their protocols and this is leading to more focused visits and a stronger awareness of progress information. A group of governors is focusing more explicitly on the impact of improvement activities and leadership changes on pupils' progress. The review of the use of the pupil premium funding has prompted closer monitoring of the progress of disadvantaged pupils, with more regular requests for reports to show the ongoing impact of teaching and intervention. Your insistence that all staff appraisal targets have an explicit emphasis on the progress of disadvantaged pupils is supporting governors in holding leaders and teachers to account.

Leaders' post-inspection improvement plans did not have time to impact positively upon the extremely disappointing outcomes achieved by Year 11 pupils in 2016. Progress was significantly weak in a wide range of subjects and particularly so in mathematics, science, geography and technology. While the school is still in the early stages of its improvement journey, signs of improvement are emerging. Year 11 pupils are making better progress in mathematics and science and key groups identified at the last inspection, including pupils eligible for support through the pupil premium, are achieving better outcomes.

Performance gaps for key groups of pupils are beginning to narrow. External reviews of standards and a history of accurate prediction lend credibility to these projected outcomes. However, leaders and governors will need to monitor standards rigorously to ensure that anticipated improvements are manifested in eventual outcomes.

You have led a comprehensive range of actions to bring about improvement. Improvement plans reflect a comprehensive and prompt need for change. New systems and leadership structures are beginning to have a positive impact on the quality of teaching, behaviour and emerging outcomes. Leaders now need to embed these developments in a sustained and consistent manner through ongoing professional development and assiduous monitoring. While behaviour is improving, more urgent action is needed to address the poor attendance of those pupils whose absence is undermining their progress.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The school has worked closely with partners to strengthen teaching and whole-school leadership. Senior and middle leaders have visited a range of high-performing schools to develop a stronger awareness of good practice. Leaders have commissioned external reviews of the use of the pupil premium funding and governance. The results of these reviews are leading to more focused support and tighter monitoring. A two-day, focused external review of the teaching of mathematics has led to improvements in teaching and schemes of work. Further partnerships are improving provision for pupils studying separate sciences. The local authority has provided additional support to externally monitor standards.

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

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley

Her Majesty's Inspector