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27 April 2017

Mrs Angela Henderson
Principal
Springfield Academy
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Dear Mrs Henderson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Springfield Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 3 April 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 February 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the trust 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:

- reduce persistent absence, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, so that it is at least in line with that of other pupils nationally
- review arrangements regularly for use of shared spaces, particularly at lunchtime, to ensure that pupils feel safe
- sharpen leaders' evaluation of school performance so that it identifies the most important priorities for the school and use this information to set precise milestones that governors can use to judge the impact of leaders' actions at different points across the year.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders and subject leaders, representatives of the governing body, the chief executive of the academy trust and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was reviewed alongside the leaders' summary evaluation of the performance of the school. You and I conducted visits to a number of classrooms and learning spaces and looked at the work in pupils' workbooks to check on learning and progress. I also met with a group of pupils and a group of teaching and non-teaching staff. Documents were scrutinised, including minutes of the education standards committee, plans for pupil premium spending, records of the checks conducted by leaders on the quality of teaching and learning and information relating to the current attendance and achievement of pupils. I also reviewed the checks that are made on the suitability of adults to work with children.

Context

There have been a number of changes to staffing since the previous inspection. Two teachers left the school in the summer term 2016 and a new teacher was appointed at that time. This academic year, two leaders have returned from leave of absence. A new assistant headteacher, with responsibility for key stage 2 and the leadership of English, took up post in September 2016. The deputy headteacher, who also leads the early years, has returned to a teaching role within early years. Two governors have resigned from the education standards committee and a new governor was appointed during the autumn term, 2016.

Main findings

Leaders have taken steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school and this is apparent in key stage 2, where workbooks show that more pupils are now making good progress. Pupils report that teachers are expecting more of them and that they need to work hard throughout their lessons. Leaders are clear where some inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain and are providing coaching and support for staff to help them to improve.

Leaders are holding teachers to account more precisely for the progress made by pupils. Teachers are now required to conduct their own analysis of the achievement of their pupils and present this to leaders in progress meetings. Teachers use this information to identify those pupils who need to make more rapid progress to catch up and to plan to meet their needs.

Subject leaders are playing a more significant role in improving teaching and learning. They have benefited from your support, and that of the school

improvement partner, to ensure that they have the skills to conduct checks on the quality of teaching and learning. They are providing valuable feedback to teachers and, where necessary, additional support to help teachers to improve their practice. For example, teachers spoke positively of the guidance that they have received from the new leader of English to help them to improve the quality of their teaching of grammar.

Leaders have worked with teachers to agree a new curriculum statement for mathematics and this has ensured greater consistency in the teaching across the school. Pupils recognise that they are benefiting from more opportunities to solve problems and to explain their reasoning. Leaders know that some pupils still need to secure their basic understanding of number facts, such as multiplication tables, and are working with teachers to address this.

Staff feel well supported by leaders. They value the training that they have received and the opportunities to observe practice in other schools. This has led to improvements in the teaching of phonics and guided reading. You are successfully developing a culture where staff are confident to ask for the help that they need to improve their skills.

The quality of provision in the early years has improved since the previous inspection and a higher proportion of children are reaching the expected level for their age. Investment in training and resources has led to the development of an exceptionally strong learning environment for children, both inside and outdoors. Children have access to a wide range of interesting learning opportunities, which cover all areas of the curriculum. As a result, they demonstrate good levels of concentration and enjoy working together to complete tasks. At times, adults do not make best use of the time that they spend working with small groups of children to enable them to make faster progress. In particular, more needs to be done to ensure that children can form their letters and numbers accurately by the time that they leave the Reception year.

Leaders commissioned a review of pupil premium spending immediately following the previous inspection. While this review was not particularly incisive in identifying the school's priorities in relation to pupil premium spending, leaders have built on this. They now ensure that they are keeping a careful check on this aspect of the school's work. You have made good use of guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation to help determine the actions taken to support pupils. You have also undertaken training to help you with this. The governor who has responsibility for checking the impact of pupil premium funding has an exceptionally strong knowledge of the school's work. She has provided substantial and robust challenge to leaders, ensuring that achievement is improving for disadvantaged pupils in most year groups across the school.

The trust took appropriate action to commission a review of governance promptly,

following the previous inspection. This enabled governors to identify and act upon several priorities to improve their work. A revised scheme of delegation has ensured that there is greater clarity about roles and responsibilities. A programme of induction for governors has been developed and has helped a new governor to understand her role. All governors have benefited from training to help them to interpret pupils' assessment information and this has given them the skills that they need to challenge leaders to increase the pace of improvement. Governors know the school and are clear about the strengths and weaknesses.

You have increased the rigour with which you are tackling poor attendance. You are implementing short-term action plans with targets which are negotiated with families. Increased support is now available from a member of staff who has responsibility to work with families to secure better attendance. However, you recognise that persistent absenteeism is too high, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. More needs to be done to ensure that levels of absence reduce further.

You have accurately identified that now is the right time to reshape your plans so that you have a clear focus on what more needs to be done to become a good school. However, your self-evaluation lacks precision about the current learning and progress of pupils and is too general about the remaining priorities for the school. Your plans contain some measurable targets for the progress made by pupils, but lack the short-term 'milestones' which will allow governors to check on the impact of your work on a regular basis, particularly relating to the quality of teaching and learning.

Pupils who spoke with me indicated that they are happy in school. They noted that, since the new behaviour policy has been implemented, teachers are more consistent when they use warnings and consequences in the classroom. However, some pupils indicated that there are times, at lunchtime particularly, when they are anxious in some of the open-plan areas in school. This is because they are in close proximity to other pupils, including older pupils, from other schools based on the site. While leaders have increased supervision in these areas, pupils still feel worried that they may encounter inappropriate behaviour. When I raised this with you during the inspection, you worked quickly with other senior leaders from the academy trust to amend the arrangements for lunchtimes so that pupils can feel more secure. This situation requires regular review to ensure that all pupils feel safe throughout the school day.

External support

The academy trust has taken appropriate steps to challenge and support leaders. Additional time, on a weekly basis, from the trust-appointed school improvement partner, has provided you with extra leadership capacity. This has helped you to develop the skills of newer leaders so that they can play a fuller role in improving teaching and learning. In addition, the robust challenge from the school

improvement partner has helped you to increase the pace of change in the school.

The local authority has worked well with trust leaders to keep a close check on the progress that you have made since the previous inspection. Regular meetings of the 'school support group', chaired by the local authority, have ensured that leaders have been held to account at each stage of the school's improvement journey. This arrangement has also enabled the local authority to provide additional support to the school, notably some highly effective work with leaders to develop the quality of provision in the early years.

I am copying this letter to the executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown

Her Majesty's Inspector