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Mr Dave Lee-Allan
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Dear Mr Lee-Allan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stowmarket High School

Following my visit to your school on 25 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in September 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in September 2015, 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.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior and middle leaders, three members of the governing body, a representative of the Hackney Learning Trust and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last monitoring inspection. The school improvement plan and other documents relating to improving the school were evaluated. The opportunity to walk the school with you enabled me to see pupils at work in lessons.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, new leaders of mathematics and science, and a coordinator of special educational needs have been appointed. Strategies are in place to reduce the school's long-standing budgetary deficit. Discussions with the Education and Skills Funding Agency to refurbish parts of the school buildings are ongoing. No clear date has been agreed to commence this work. You are negotiating with the Waveney Multi-Academy Trust to become an academy later this year.

Main findings

Results in 2016 were lower than expected. Overall progress and attainment measures were below average. Increasing the robustness of the school's assessment procedures, and their use to predict expected outcomes, continues to be one of your key priorities for improvement.

Concerns about results and the pace of improvement prompted a review by the local authority at the end of 2016, focusing on the actions of school leaders in improving the quality of teaching and learning, and the impact of this on pupils' achievement. The review confirmed that you and other leaders were making the necessary improvements. You have used their findings to update your improvement plans and focus them more sharply on those areas that need further work.

You have responded to the recommendation I made during the last monitoring inspection to improve the validity of your assessment information. You are working collaboratively with the local authority and the Hackney Learning Trust to corroborate your own views about the quality of teaching and the impact it is having on pupils' progress. In addition, you have commissioned a commercial provider to help you moderate your assessment information and increase the accuracy of your predictions about outcomes this year.

Trust and cooperation between senior and middle leaders is improving. Leaders at all levels are working much more cohesively to secure further improvement. New leaders in mathematics and science have added to the school's capacity to improve. The small group of middle leaders I met with confirmed the increased accountability and higher expectations of them. They understand their roles in contributing to raising overall achievement. Faculties have been reorganised to promote the sharing of best practice and improve the monitoring within foundation subjects. A regular cycle of monitoring, scrutiny of pupils' work and evaluation of progress information remains in place. Interventions to support pupils preparing for GCSE and other examinations this summer are underway.

Increasingly, staff are using assessment information to spot underperformance and identify pupils in need of additional support. Currently, you feel that pupils in Year 11 will achieve much higher GCSE results this year. Pupils currently in Year 10 are

also expected to achieve well next year. Assessment procedures are more embedded in Years 10 and 11 than in the earlier key stage. The local authority has provided further training for middle leaders to help them monitor the progress and welfare of pupils in key stage 3. This is particularly important as pupils commence their GCSE studies in Year 9.

You have also responded to the recommendation I made during the last monitoring inspection to strengthen provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Your recently appointed coordinator of special educational needs shows a much clearer understanding of pupils' needs, and the strategies teachers need to help these pupils make progress in lessons. Teachers now have access to 'pupil passports' so that they know who these pupils are, and the particular needs they have. Seating plans are in place in classrooms. Training has taken place to help staff engage these pupils in learning by targeting questions towards them and involving them in discussions. During our learning walk we saw a good example of the additional support put in place to strengthen the basic literacy skills of a targeted group of less-able pupils.

Our learning walk also confirmed your view that, overall, teaching is becoming more consistent. We both agreed that it needs to improve further. In most lessons visited, teachers are organised, learning outcomes are shared with pupils and behaviour is managed effectively. Teachers use practical tasks to capture pupils' interest. Books are marked to provide pupils with feedback about the quality of their work. However, not all teachers are correcting basic spelling and grammatical errors, particularly in lessons in key stage 3.

At times, a minority of pupils show a lack of interest and do not engage fully. This is because not all teachers plan learning suited to their different abilities. Often, the least and the most able end up doing the same work. Most-able pupils are not always fully challenged to do their very best. Not all teachers make regular checks in lessons of the quality and quantity of work being done by pupils.

Thorough monitoring is ensuring that pupils' attendance continues to rise. Currently it is much closer to the national average. Attendance in all years is improving but your records show significant gaps between disadvantaged pupils compared with others, particularly in Years 9 and 10. You acknowledge that more needs to be done to ensure that these gaps begin to narrow.

A wide range of monitoring information shows that improvements to behaviour noted at the time of the last monitoring inspection are being built upon. However, you shared with me concerns regarding a minority of pupils in one year group. Staff know who these pupils are. They also know what is needed to help these pupils understand the expectations of them and develop positive attitudes to learning. We both agreed that their behaviour must match that in other year groups by the time of the school's re-inspection.

Governors continue to monitor closely the school's improvement. Minutes of their meetings show that they are providing you with both support and challenge. They feel that recently, the rate of improvement has accelerated. Governors are involved fully in the actions being taken to join a multi-academy trust later this year.

External support

The local authority and the Hackney Learning Trust continue to provide the school with effective support. The local authority and the Trust both feel that the pace of improvement is quickening, momentum is building and that school is heading in the right direction. They and your governors share the same view that results need to show significant improvement this year.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector