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Ms Mary Sandell
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Dear Ms Sandell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Forest School

Following my visit to your school on 20 June 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 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.

The school should take further action to:

- evaluate improvements to teaching, learning and assessment by their impact on pupils' progress
- strengthen school improvement plans by adding measurable milestones which governors can use to evaluate the impact of actions taken by school leaders
- strengthen the accuracy of self-evaluation by seeking greater external challenge and support.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, and members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. You accompanied me on a brief visit to a number of lessons around the school. I evaluated a range of documents, including improvement plans.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection in February 2016, there have been several changes to the membership of the governing body, including the appointment of a new chair and vice chair.

As headteacher, you will be leaving the school at the end of August and your successor will take up the post in September.

Main findings

Shortly after the inspection, school leaders and governors set out to systematically and urgently address the identified areas for improvement. You also identified the need to improve literacy, which has been a strong focus in the school this year. Leaders believe that achievement was previously being limited by pupils' limited ability to express themselves effectively in writing, including the most able. Leaders have set out to address this and are checking that expected actions have been taken. The school's own performance information indicates that pupils in Year 11 are on course to make better progress than in 2016.

Rightly, leaders focused on improving the quality of teaching. Your passion is for lessons to show 'fizz' and excitement. Your monitoring shows that lessons show greater levels of engagement and pupils report that they are enjoying their learning more. During my visits to classrooms, the atmosphere was purposeful and pupils were appropriately engaged in a range of learning activities. You were able to point out the positive impact of some actions you had taken, including the introduction of a reader in residence to promote reading.

An external review of pupil premium expenditure provided a helpful basis for a strategy to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils. Pastoral and academic teams are working effectively together to enable disadvantaged pupils to make better progress. A number of changes have taken place, which are proving effective. For example, a summer school for disadvantaged pupils joining Year 7 in September focused on improving their skills in English and mathematics. A parent liaison officer is working hard to improve parental engagement, which has led to improved attendance at parents' evening. Practical advice for parents has enabled them to get the support from services that their children need, including help to improve attendance. In school, there is strong support for pupils' emotional and social needs.

Leaders now expect all teachers to take responsibility for the progress made by disadvantaged pupils, rather than relying on intervention groups to support those falling behind to catch up. Sixth-form reading buddies have promoted improvements in reading. Many disadvantaged pupils take music lessons, mainly in drums and guitar, which are proving to be enjoyable and motivational. These encouraging actions appear to be making a positive difference, but the current year's pupil premium strategy does not have targets for the achievement of disadvantaged pupils throughout the school, against which governors can judge the impact of the annual expenditure.

Arrangements for transition from primary schools have improved. Visits to feeder primary schools gather precise information about pupils joining Year 7 in September. This helps to identify pupils who may have underachieved at primary school, for example some of the most able disadvantaged pupils who have not yet caught up from lower starting points. Observations of pupils during lessons and the use of a range of diagnostic tests are also used to identify underachievers. Steps taken to plug gaps in learning show early signs of positive impact. The school's performance information shows that, overall, disadvantaged pupils are making greater progress than previously. However, the most able disadvantaged pupils could do even better.

You have appointed strong leaders into posts with responsibility for some vulnerable groups of pupils. The newly appointed special educational needs coordinator is conducting thorough diagnoses of the learning needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. She then plans graded provision to meet their needs more precisely. There are encouraging signs of improved progress by pupils who have special educational needs, but it is too early to see the full impact.

The coordinator of support for pupils who speak English as an additional language shows similar determination to accurately assess the proficiency in English by these pupils. Her impressive expertise is enabling teachers to understand the barriers experienced by some pupils as they acquire English. For example, some pupils regarded as advanced bilingual learners can struggle with inference and deduction, which can limit their attainment at the highest grades. There is evidence of improved achievement by pupils who speak English as an additional language.

A number of other steps have been taken by leaders to improve achievement at the school. Teaching groups in Years 7 and 8 have been reorganised to raise expectations, particularly of pupils with low prior attainment. Regular monitoring of pupils' work shows consistent application of the school's relaunched feedback policy. School leaders feel that this is playing a significant contribution towards improving standards. There is also closer tracking of individual pupils against their personal targets, although school leaders acknowledge that targets, particularly for most able, may not be high enough. These actions are all listed in the school's plan in response to the previous inspection. Staff have worked very hard and are encouraged by pupils' responses. However, full evaluation of impact is not yet

complete.

Enthusiastic subject leaders have an increased role in monitoring and evaluating teaching. They now play a greater role in holding teachers to account for the progress of pupils in their classes. Subject leaders are developing criteria to help determine how well pupils are progressing through key stages 3 and 4 in the subjects for which they are responsible. The assessment system is in transition, with different scales and associated criteria used in different subjects and different year groups. This makes it difficult to determine consistency across the curriculum. Also, there has been very little external moderation to check that teachers' assessments are accurate.

The governing body has experienced some turnover. Shortly after the previous inspection, a new chair of the governing body was elected and since then a number of new governors have been appointed. The external review of governance provided some useful advice for the new chair and revitalised governing body, who are participating in training. Governors rightly identify that leaders have improved support for disadvantaged pupils and, currently, most-able pupils are the group who are most vulnerable to underachievement. The chair of the governing body has a clear vision for further improvement at the school. Governors agree that the development plan needs to have a sharper focus on the impact of leaders' actions on the progress of groups of pupils. However, some new governors lack the experience and expertise to hold school leaders to account rigorously. They largely evaluate the school's performance on information provided by school leaders and do not routinely probe leaders for justification. The governors would benefit from greater external evaluation and challenge.

Governors are aware that the school's website does not publish the information that the Department for Education recommends for academies.

Although many positive steps have been taken since the inspection, school leaders, including governors, are still prioritising actions based on the areas for improvement recommended in the previous inspection report. This was well over a year ago; since then, performance data for 2016 has been published, and pupils are now completing end-of-year assessments. It is time for leaders to complete a robust self-evaluation to identify current strengths and weaknesses. Your judgements can then be used to update the school's improvement plan, including targets and milestones for the achievement of groups in the school, such as disadvantaged and the most able pupils. This would make it easier for leaders and governors to evaluate the success of actions taken to improve the performance of these groups.

External support

An adviser from Wokingham local authority has supported the school with their pupil premium strategy, which is not yet complete. School leaders and governors do not seek any external support or review of the school's effectiveness.

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

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector