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Martyn Morgan
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Dear Mr Morgan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Smestow 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 October 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors 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:

- make sure all pupils, especially boys, present their work to the best of their ability
- further develop pupils', especially boys', writing skills and ability to understand what they have read
- enhance pupils' ability to apply their mathematical knowledge and understanding to a range of increasingly difficult problems
- make sure that all pupils can identify the groups who might want to get them to behave in a way that is unlawful or antisocial

- further develop governors' understanding of how the trust, Education Central Multi-Academy Trust (ECMAT), holds them accountable.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders and subject leaders, pupils and members of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body. I also met a representative of the trust. All of the meetings focused on the effectiveness of the school's actions to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. With you, I observed pupils' learning and behaviour during a tour of the school. I evaluated pupils' progress through an extensive scrutiny of their work across a range of subjects. I sought pupils' views during informal discussions as part of the visits to lessons and a formal meeting with pupils from Years 7, 8 and 9. Action plans, external evaluations and information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance were scrutinised.

Context

Since the previous inspection you have restructured the senior and extended leadership teams. You have created new leadership positions called 'zone leaders', who are responsible for checking the effectiveness of teaching, pupils' progress and attitudes to learning and the effectiveness of the work across a range of subjects. Three teachers have left the school.

Main findings

You and your leadership team, including governors, are clear about what you and your staff need to do to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and to make sure the school improves. You and your staff have an accurate view of the school's strengths and areas that need further improvement. As a result, you are able to intervene quickly when the quality of teaching, learning and assessment falls below expectations. You have quickly identified underperforming staff and provided support and challenge for these teachers. Information provided by the school shows that the vast majority of these teachers are responding positively to the support and are better at making sure pupils make good or better progress from their starting points. The work in pupils' books and the views of pupils who spoke to me support your assertion.

Since the previous inspection, you have introduced an assessment system for key stage 3 that identifies what pupils should be able to do in each subject in each year group based on their prior knowledge, skills and understanding. Teachers in all subjects are using this system effectively to plan appropriately challenging learning activities, including for the most able pupils, and to identify and support pupils who are falling behind. In addition, you and other senior leaders are using the information from these assessments to hold individual teachers and zone leaders to

account for the work in their classes or in the subjects for which they have responsibility. You recognise that while there are improvements in the quality of pupils' learning and teachers' use of assessment information, further improvements are required. This is particularly so in the way that pupils, particularly a small minority of boys, complete and present their work. You have challenged the few remaining teachers' inconsistent use of the school's marking policy successfully.

The work in pupils' books and the information about pupils' progress shows that pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are improving across all year groups. The vast majority of pupils are developing their reading skills successfully and have a better understanding of what they have read. You have introduced a commercial reading scheme which has contributed to an increasing number of pupils reading widely and often. However, you acknowledge that pupils', especially boys', writing skills need to improve further and that a few pupils need to improve their ability to understand what they have read. Your deputy headteacher has recently taken on the responsibility for developing pupils' literacy skills in subjects other than English. She has responded swiftly and successfully to taking on this role. The early signs are that an increasing number of staff are focusing on improving pupils' literacy skills effectively. This is particularly the case in history and geography.

Pupils' ability to recall and use basic mathematical concepts and processes fluently is secure. Staff in the mathematics department are now addressing, with some success, pupils' ability to reason mathematically and to apply what they know and understand to a range of increasingly difficult problems. You and the leader with responsibility for mathematics acknowledge that this is a continuing area for improvement.

Pupils who spoke to me said that pupils' behaviour has improved significantly since the previous inspection. Pupils told me that teachers apply the school's behaviour policy and manage pupils' misbehaviour much more consistently. One pupil reflected the views of many when she said, 'I can now focus on my learning because teachers are much better at making sure pupils behave.' Information provided by the school shows that the number of fixed-term exclusions and the days lost to exclusion have reduced significantly. This is also the case for the number of incidents of unacceptable behaviour. However, a few of the pupils who spoke to me during this inspection were unclear about the groups or individuals, such as white supremacist or animal rights groups, who might try to persuade them to be unlawful, antisocial or to behave in an extremist way.

The review of governance, recommended at the previous inspection, has been completed. Governors have responded quickly to the recommendations in the review and have produced their own action plan. This plan identifies the appropriate actions governors need to take to make sure that the school improves further. For example, governors now have a better understanding of the published information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance. It is clear that governors are using this information much more effectively to challenge school leaders, and

themselves, to address pupils' underachievement or poor behaviour quickly. Governors are also challenging school information and seeking verification of leaders' assertions about pupils' progress, attendance and behaviour, especially at key stage 3.

External support

Education Central Multi Academy Trust (ECMAT) has provided effective support to the school since the previous inspection. The trust checks the work of the school effectively through school visits and through the half-termly 'forecast and analysis' support and challenge meetings. They have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. As a result of these meetings, ECMAT has carefully identified and selected the right school improvement partners and agencies to bring about the necessary improvement. For example, ECMAT has commissioned reviews by outside agencies of: the school's key stage 3 provision; the effectiveness of middle leaders; the effectiveness of the school's work in developing pupils' numeracy skills; governance; and pupils' behaviour. You told me that this support has been 'great' and has helped you and your leaders to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Governors told me that they now have a much clearer understanding of published information as a result of the review of governance and subsequent support arranged by ECMAT. They added that they can now challenge leaders' assertions better. The improvements in the quality of teaching, pupils' behaviour and the challenge of school leaders evidenced in the governors' minutes of meetings are examples of the effectiveness of this support and guidance. ECMAT has arranged for leaders and staff to visit 'outstanding' schools to observe effective practice. The trust has also ensured that Smestow School leaders share their knowledge and expertise with other ECMAT schools. At the previous inspection, ECMAT had not made sure that a scheme of delegation was in place. This has now been resolved and members of the local governing body are clear about their roles and responsibilities. However, governors told me that they are still unclear about some of the trust's accountability structures and how ECMAT hold them to account for the effectiveness of governance.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries

Her Majesty's Inspector