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Ms Katie Dixon
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Dixon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birches Head Academy

Following my visit to your school on 18 July 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 January 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 inspection, I met with you, other leaders, an external consultant commissioned by the school and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I undertook brief visits to a number of lessons accompanied by members of the senior leadership team, and looked at examples of pupils' work. I evaluated a range of documents and records, including the school improvement plan, information about attendance and behaviour, and school policies.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have made some changes to the senior leadership team. These changes include the promotion of colleagues already at the school and the appointment of new staff. You have restructured senior leaders' roles in response to the school's improvement priorities. You have developed a new structure for pastoral middle leadership posts, ready for September 2017. Some new members have strengthened the governing body's educational expertise.

Leaders and governors have made the decision for the school to join a local multi-academy trust (MAT). The local authority supports this decision. The process of the school's conversion to become an academy is under way. Beneficial links with the MAT have already been identified, and plans to develop these formally are in place.

Main findings

Teachers take into account pupils' prior learning and starting points when planning lessons. Lesson plans include clear identification of learning questions which are structured to increase the amount of challenge throughout the lesson. Sometimes, to reflect their starting points, pupils work on different tasks from those of their peers. As a result, there is now more suitable challenge for pupils in lessons, particularly for the most able pupils. Pupils can confidently identify their starting points based on their past successes, and select appropriate tasks when they are expected to do so.

In mathematics, teachers use questioning effectively to encourage pupils to think more deeply about their learning and justify their answers. These opportunities provide pupils with the chance to consolidate their learning. Where pupils have securely developed resilience and problem-solving skills, they approach challenging and demanding questions with enthusiasm and confidence. They learn well from errors they make, and they benefit from valuable opportunities to learn from each other. Occasionally, teachers do not target their questioning effectively. This leads to a dominance in discussions of the most enthusiastic pupils. As a result, sometimes teachers do not make sure that other pupils are sufficiently engaged in their learning. Teachers regularly use examination assessment criteria in their feedback to pupils. Pupils value this sharply focused dialogue with their teachers, and approach follow-up activities in a purposeful manner.

Leaders focus on developing teachers' use of strategies and approaches to engage pupils who are uninterested in learning. For example, professional development sessions focus on how teachers can develop pupils' resilience. Your decision to appoint lead practitioners in the school encourages effective sharing of the strong practice that exists within the school.

Leaders' recent decision to alter the structure of the school day makes sure that there are valuable opportunities for pupils to read regularly. Form tutors focus on

developing pupils' literacy skills and confidence. Teachers make a point of using subject-specific terms in lessons, and insisting that pupils do the same. As a result of this support, pupils' literacy levels are developing. For example, pupils' reading ages are improving.

Since the previous inspection, the school's special educational needs coordinator has established a comprehensive and systematic approach to track how well pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are achieving. Staff regularly review and evaluate which strategies most effectively support these pupils in the classroom. As a result, the special educational needs coordinator has an oversight of the progress that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make, and can develop teachers' approaches in class. When required, they can also provide additional interventions for these pupils.

Leaders continue to make improvements in pupils' attendance. They promote to pupils the benefits of high attendance. High attendance is celebrated and rewarded. Parents of pupils whose attendance is a concern are invited to clinics at school and form tutors develop attendance plans to support pupils. There have been marked improvements in attendance for particular pupil groups, including disadvantaged pupils.

Your recent analysis of assessment information for Year 11 shows that there are expectations of improvement across many subjects. For example, you expect strong improvements in attainment in science for all pupils, and in mathematics for disadvantaged pupils in this year's GCSE results. Variation in pupils' outcomes between subjects is reducing as you address the legacy of previous poor teaching, but it still remains. You expect the differences in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils currently in Year 11 and other pupils nationally to diminish in many subjects. Lower down the school, these differences continue to reduce. An increasing number of pupils currently at the school are studying for qualifications which contribute to the English baccalaureate because of clearer guidance when pupils pick their options.

External support

Effective external support is provided to the school from a variety of sources. A national leader of education (NLE) continues to work with the school, providing targeted leadership support and development for senior and middle leaders. The NLE provides external validation of leaders' actions and ensures that plans for school improvement are firmly grounded in clear evidence about how well the school is doing. The NLE also models leadership behaviours and practice, for example working alongside middle leaders to monitor the quality of teaching and learning. This develops middle leaders' skills and confidence.

Middle leaders participate in subject networks with colleagues from the MAT that the school is intending to join. These opportunities enable external validation of

assessment information and the development of teaching schemes in response to national qualification changes.

Leaders' decision to participate in a city-wide mathematics project has also provided successful additional leadership and teaching capacity within the school's mathematics department. This has contributed to better progress in mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Rob Hackfath
Her Majesty's Inspector