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Mr Paul Marsden
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Marsden

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Belmont Community School

Following my visit to your school on 9 October 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 and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- sharpen teachers' use of pupil information so that expectations are consistently high for all pupils, and learning activities and questioning routinely challenges all pupils' thinking and builds their resilience
- ensure that all leaders continue to promote consistency of practice and standards across all departments.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, members of your senior leadership team and a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with a representative from the local authority to discuss the support they have provided to the school since the last inspection. The school self-evaluation document, improvement plan and other relevant documents were evaluated. Brief visits were made to several lessons with both of your deputy headteachers, and alongside senior leaders, a sample of pupils' work was scrutinised. I also spoke to a panel of pupils from Years 9 and 10 to evaluate their views on developments since the last inspection.

Context

Since the last inspection, staffing has become more stable. You and governors commissioned an external review of pupil premium spending and its impact and have begun to act upon its findings. There have been some changes to governance, including the appointment of a new chair of governors.

Main findings

Leaders and governors have taken a range of appropriate actions to address the weaknesses identified in leadership and teaching, learning and assessment at the last inspection. Such actions are identified in an action plan that directly addresses each of the areas for improvement. Improvement is evident in each of the identified areas, although the pace of improvement is more rapid in some than others. Nonetheless, you, senior leaders and governors are all determined and committed to ensure the school improves for the pupils and the community it serves.

Teaching is showing signs of improvement. Leaders have established clear expectations of how teachers plan and use pupil information. For example, each class teacher uses a 'SPOT file' which brings together all relevant information about each pupil. As part of this file, all teachers have access to a document giving them specific strategies to use in order to accelerate the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils. However, leaders acknowledge that not all teachers are using pupil information as consistently and effectively as they could. This means that sometimes, teachers' expectations are still too low, and activities and teachers' questioning do not routinely challenge all pupils' thinking. Opportunities to build pupils' resilience are also sometimes overlooked.

Training that teachers receive is well focused on areas of need, such as questioning and curriculum changes. Leaders encourage teachers to regularly share ideas and classroom practice with each other, therefore promoting a strong team ethos within each department.

Improved assessment practices allow leaders and governors to have a more accurate view of pupils' progress across the school. Such views are informed by cross-checked assessment pieces and information from scrutinising pupils' work to check their accuracy. This also allows leaders to assess and gain an accurate picture of pupils' progress over time.

Senior and middle leaders' roles and responsibilities have been clarified and lines of accountability are much clearer. Middle leaders now take a more active role in checking the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their departments. As a result, expectations are reiterated constantly. Pupils who are falling behind are quickly identified and extra support is provided to help them catch up. Leaders acknowledge that there is still work to do in order to ensure consistency and improved standards within all departments.

Leaders have identified those pupils whose literacy skills are a barrier to their learning, particularly disadvantaged pupils. By using additional funding effectively, leaders have swiftly put into place targeted additional support for these pupils. As a result of this additional support, pupils in Years 7 and 8 are improving their literacy skills, particularly their reading ages. Such targeted support is proving worthwhile, as it is helping pupils to improve their achievement in other subjects too.

You and governors commissioned an external review of the school's use of pupil premium funding in January 2017. Your deputy headteacher, who oversees the work in this important area, has made great strides in acting upon the recommendations and implementing strategies so that the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged pupils improve. There is now a greater focus on providing high-quality teaching as well as, where appropriate, additional bespoke support for disadvantaged pupils. In addition to this, the English, mathematics and science departments have nominated ambassadors who oversee the progress and attainment of this group of pupils in their respective departments. Current work in pupils' books shows little difference between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in the school. Some strategies, however, are still in their infancy and, therefore, it is too soon to fully evaluate their impact.

Governance has been strengthened since the previous inspection. The governing body offers a wide range of skills and expertise in readiness to continually support and challenge you and other leaders on the school's improvement journey. Governors have access to detailed reports, and, because of this, understand the school's strengths and weaknesses. Each governor is linked to an aspect of the school, for example safeguarding and pupil premium funding. Governors meet regularly with leaders to discuss their linked areas and therefore keep up to date with developments.

External support

The vast majority of support provided to the school has been from the local authority. This has had a positive impact because it has supported both senior and middle leaders in their monitoring activities, for example through specific departmental reviews. Such reviews have enabled leaders to get to grips with the strengths and weaknesses and implement appropriate actions to improve. Additional support in English, mathematics and science has developed leaders, and provided them with a baseline of what to improve in their drive to improve standards. Improvements in modern foreign languages and humanities have been variable. However, the local authority has helped the school develop links with other local schools to improve standards in these two areas.

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

Yours sincerely

Darren Stewart
Her Majesty's Inspector