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Clare Hatto
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Dear Mrs Hatto

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Aldercar High School

Following my visit to your school on 16 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 March 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in March 2017, 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 last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- improve the rigour with which leaders, at all levels, evaluate the impact of the school's work, identifying clear actions to bring about further improvement
- improve the quality of governance to ensure that leaders are held to account more closely
- improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that teachers use assessment information to plan activities which meet the needs of pupils of different abilities.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders and members of the governing body. I also spoke by telephone with a representative of the local authority. I met with a group of pupils and also spoke to pupils informally during their lessons. We visited six classes and discussed the strengths and weaknesses observed. I looked at a sample of pupils' books to evaluate the quality of their learning. I scrutinised a variety of other documentation, including action plans, minutes of meetings, monitoring activities and information relating to safeguarding and pupils' progress.

Context

In the last few years, there has been considerable instability in senior leadership at the school. You were appointed in September 2017, becoming the fourth headteacher in three years. Since the last inspection, one deputy headteacher has left and not been replaced. You have extended the leadership team by allocating whole-school responsibility for teaching, learning and assessment, and monitoring and evaluation to two senior leaders. The school is currently undergoing an extensive rebuilding project.

Main findings

Pupils' outcomes improved considerably in 2017. Overall, progress is now above the national average, from being well below in 2016. The progress of disadvantaged pupils also improved but remains considerably below that of other pupils nationally. Progress in English also improved. However, it remains below the national average and is much lower for disadvantaged pupils.

Since your appointment in September 2017, you have injected a sense of urgency into the work of the school. However, although leaders took some appropriate action prior to your appointment, they have been too slow to address some of the areas identified as being in need of improvement. This has meant that there is still much work to be done to bring about the required improvements to the school. Nevertheless, the work that has been undertaken since the last inspection, and in particular since September, has been effective. You have shared a clear vision among staff and pupils, rooted in a sense of 'core purpose'. Staff and pupils understand your aims and expectations.

In September 2017, you rightly prioritised the need to improve pupils' attendance and behaviour to ensure that they were ready and prepared to learn. You introduced a set of 'essential student standards', incorporating high expectations of attendance, uniform and behaviour. You allocated responsibility for leading improvements in these aspects of the school's work to the assistant headteacher. He has worked with heads of house and tutors to ensure that all staff recognise

their responsibility in supporting pupils to improve their behaviour and attendance. Attendance is now more closely monitored than in the past. For example, tutors discuss attendance with individual pupils and heads of house meet with parents when concerns arise. Leaders have also devised a rewards strategy to celebrate high levels of attendance. Pupils say that they know that their attendance is closely monitored. They recognise the importance of attending regularly and appreciate the support they receive to overcome any barriers to regular attendance. Whole-school attendance, and that of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, has improved this year but it remains below the national average.

Behaviour has improved since the last inspection. There is a clear understanding of expectations of behaviour, both in lessons and around school. Leaders have introduced a hierarchical system of sanctions which is clearly understood by all. Pupils say that the majority of teachers follow this system and that behaviour in lessons has improved as a result. Pupils report few instances of low-level disruption in their lessons and the number of requests for 'on-call' senior staff to support staff in managing behaviour in lessons has reduced. You have also insisted that mobile phones are not used in school. This policy has been welcomed by pupils who recognise the improvements that this has made to their social relationships, as well as the reduction in disruption to their learning.

In October 2017, you created an internal 'seclusion' provision to reduce the need for issuing fixed-term exclusions. This facility provides both challenge and support for pupils to amend their behaviour. The number of fixed-term exclusions, including for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, has reduced since the last inspection and has reduced further since the introduction of the 'seclusion' facility. However, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are still disproportionately represented.

You have introduced a more robust, structured system of monitoring and evaluating the school's work. You meet fortnightly with senior and middle leaders to challenge them on individual pupils' progress, identifying those at risk of underachieving and agreeing actions to intervene. You have also introduced a whole-school, strategic approach to evaluating the quality of education provided by the school. For example, you have introduced a more detailed whole-school monitoring calendar. This applies greater focus on considering the impact of actions taken on improving pupils' progress than in the past.

Alongside the work to improve monitoring activities, you have ensured that the performance of staff is managed more robustly and is aligned to whole-school priorities. For example, all staff now have a target related to the impact of their feedback on pupils' progress. This is evaluated in departmental quality assurance activities, such as work scrutinies. However, monitoring activities at departmental level are not yet rigorous enough to bring about the required improvements; for

example, they do not always identify specific actions in response to weaknesses identified.

At the time of the last inspection, teachers were expected to plan lessons following the 'five pillars of Aldercar', detailing specific components required in each lesson. Following the inspection, leaders added a 'sixth pillar' regarding the expectation to plan to meet the needs of different groups of pupils. In the lessons we visited, there was very little evidence that teachers were meeting this expectation. In each class, pupils were working on the same activity, regardless of their differing abilities or needs. Work in pupils' books also indicated that teachers do not routinely use assessment information to plan to meet the needs of different abilities. You recognise that this is an urgent priority and have identified the need for additional training to ensure that all staff understand your expectations and how to achieve them in their practice.

You have identified the need to improve the quality of provision within the sixth form and have taken action to do so. For example, you are in the process of reviewing the curriculum to amend it to meet the needs of students. You have also incorporated the sixth form within whole-school monitoring activities. This has enabled you to identify specific required actions to bring about necessary improvements. You recognise the need for rapid improvement and are monitoring this closely.

The last inspection identified the need to undertake a review of the school's use of the pupil premium to assess how this aspect of the school's work could be improved. At the time of the monitoring visit, this review had not taken place and governors and leaders were unable to explain the delay. This is an urgent priority, particularly as disadvantaged pupils' progress remains considerably below that of other pupils. However, you have taken action to prioritise this aspect of the school's work by allocating responsibility to the assistant headteacher. In addition, you have identified middle leaders in each subject area to develop strategies to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and who will act on the recommendations of the review once it takes place.

Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They recognise their responsibilities and are supportive of your actions to drive improvements. However, governors did not ensure that leaders took swift action following the last inspection. They have not provided sufficient challenge to hold leaders effectively to account, for example in ensuring that the pupil premium review was carried out.

External support

The local authority has provided some effective support since the previous inspection, particularly in relation to working with individual staff. For example, school improvement officers have supported staff with developing schemes of

learning and worked with individual teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses in their teaching practice. There is, however, a lack of strategic approach to supporting school improvement. You received induction training, as a new headteacher, in the summer of 2017 but, at time of visit, there had been no other formal support.

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mosley
Her Majesty's Inspector