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Mr James Henderson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Henderson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Woodlands Community College

Following my visit to your school on 9 May 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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 good.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that recent changes to governance and the quality of teaching lead to rapid improvements in rates of progress for pupils currently in key stage 4
- review and refine current work to meet the needs of pupils with persistently poor attendance or behaviour, so that absence and exclusion rates continue to fall.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and several of your senior and middle leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Along with your assistant headteacher, I visited six lessons in English, history, mathematics and science. I met a group of Year 10 pupils, and attended part of an assembly. I also spoke to two

members of the governing body and two representatives of the local authority. I reviewed the school's central record of recruitment checks and a range of other relevant documents. These included the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, leaders' records of their work to improve the quality of teaching, and information about pupils' academic performance, attendance and exclusions.

Context

The headteacher who was in post at the last inspection has recently left to take up a similar position in another school. You joined the school as the new headteacher just over three weeks ago, at the start of the 2018 summer term. The assistant headteacher who leads the science department joined the school in September 2017. A broadly average number of other staff have left or joined the school since the last inspection. The governing body has very recently appointed three new members. The school implemented a faculty-led leadership structure approximately 18 months ago. Leaders' previous explorations around the school joining a multi-academy trust have not currently come to fruition.

Main findings

Since the last inspection, leaders and staff have worked hard to improve the school. They demonstrate a collective determination to raise standards in a sustainable way. While systems and processes in the school are now more effective than in the past, it has taken time for this to make a notable difference to pupils' outcomes by the end of Year 11. However, the pace of change seems to be accelerating since the start of this academic year. Senior and middle leaders have a clear understanding of the school's development priorities, and are working more effectively and efficiently than was previously the case. Ongoing work to streamline and sharpen the school's self-evaluation and development plans has contributed to this improvement.

Subject leaders now have a greater role to play in monitoring and improving the quality of teaching than in the past. They have undergone suitable training to assist them in this role. Senior leaders provide them with helpful support as well as challenge about the effectiveness of their work. Leaders value the opportunity to work with colleagues from other schools to sharpen their practice and develop their expertise around the quality of the curriculum and teaching, and in challenging less effective practice within their teams.

The governing body recognises that it has not held school leaders sufficiently to account in the past about the slow pace of improvement. Governors welcome support from the local authority that is enabling them to identify and address aspects of their collective practice that need to develop quickly. The very recent appointment of three further governors brings useful complementary expertise to support the governing body further. The successful appointment of you as the school's new headteacher is a testament to the governing body's commitment to the school, and its determination to ensure that standards continue to rise.

A renewed focus on teaching and learning is at the heart of improvements in the school. Staff have worked together to develop curriculum planning that builds pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding throughout their five years at the school, linked closely to the new GCSE requirements. Leaders ensure that teachers have useful opportunities to reflect on and develop their expertise, through a layered approach to training and sharing of good practice. Leaders monitor the quality of teaching and learning closely, and take prompt action to support and challenge colleagues who demonstrate aspects of less successful practice. You recognise that pockets of less effective teaching remain, particularly in science and mathematics, where staff recruitment is an ongoing challenge.

Pupils I spoke to during my visit talked positively about improvements to their learning experience. They recognise how teachers expect them to work hard and behave well. During my visits to lessons today, examples of off-task behaviour were very rare, because learning was tightly structured and suitably resourced. This helps pupils to develop their collective understanding, but does not always enable them to move on rapidly and independently from their different starting points.

Consequently, when their work is more challenging and they 'get stuck', they do not necessarily have the skills or resilience to persevere and find a solution to the problem. Pupils do, however, understand the importance of working hard and doing their best. The opportunities to visit sixth-form colleges, and universities, for example, help some of them to see the relevance of the work they do in lessons.

Pupils' outcomes by the end of Year 11 have remained stubbornly low. Progress measures placed the school below the government's floor standard in 2016 and, despite some improvement, it remained there in 2017. Pupils' achievements in English have also declined since the last inspection. Over time, pupils have routinely attained well below what they are capable of. School performance information indicates that standards are now starting to rise more rapidly than in the past, as a result of increasingly effective teaching. This is particularly evident in key stage 3, where there is less of a legacy of 'gaps in learning' to address. Pupils in key stage 4, while now making better progress than previously, continue to attain well below national figures, suggesting their progress from key stage 2 remains below average.

Leaders work with colleagues from other schools to check that teachers' assessments against the new curriculum are accurate, which gives confidence in the ongoing validity of this information. Staff look regularly to identify pupils who are underperforming against their increasingly aspirational targets. They work together to coordinate the work they do to help these pupils to improve quickly. The notable proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school, and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, are typically supported well. As a result, disadvantaged pupils perform similarly to their peers in school, and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are doing better than in the past.

Leaders' work to improve pupils' attendance is persistent and tenacious. They have adapted their policy and use of staff in order to make better use of limited resources. Consequently, absence rates and the percentage of pupils who are persistently absent from school have both declined, although both measures remain above the national average. Leaders remain determined to continue improving attendance, through maintaining a high profile with pupils and in the local community, while working sensitively to support vulnerable families appropriately.

Exclusion rates remain above the national average, and have increased over the past year. Leaders have identified changes to how behaviour is managed in school that have contributed to this increase. They work sensitively with potentially vulnerable pupils whose behaviour is challenging, including some who join the school mid-year or mid-key-stage. They are currently reflecting on how inclusion provision can be developed further, so that it provides more effective support for pupils whose behaviour puts them at risk of permanent exclusion.

External support

The local authority knows the school well, understanding its vulnerabilities, needs and challenges. Over time, the local authority has brokered and provided regular and useful help that is enabling leaders to make steady and sustainable improvements to the school. Their recent support with governor recruitment and training provides a helpful first step in the governing body's drive to improve how well they challenge leaders about standards in the school. Additionally, leaders work closely with a number of other secondary schools in the local area, specifically to support improvements to teaching and learning in the school. Staff make effective use of subject-specific advice and training, sharing what they learn with their colleagues in school. Leaders continue to explore how school-to-school support might be further enhanced through a more formal collaboration with one or more other schools.

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

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Moles
Her Majesty's Inspector