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Mrs Alison Sherman
Principal
The Sutton Academy
Elton Head Road
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WA9 5AU

Dear Mrs Sherman

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Sutton Academy

Following my visit to your school on 10 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 three 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 recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders, and representatives of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school improvement plan. We visited lessons and looked at pupils' work. I met with a group of staff. I spoke to Year 11 pupils during their social time. I took into account other documentation, including an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding. I also took account of the responses of parents and carers to the online questionnaire, Parent View.

Context

Since the last inspection there have been many staff changes. You made significant changes to the structure of the senior leadership team. One assistant principal left to take up a promoted post in a different school. As a consequence of restructuring and staff changes, two new leaders have recently joined the leadership team. One takes

responsibility for improving the quality of teaching and learning while the other takes responsibility for improving pupils' behaviour.

Additionally, a new leader of the science faculty and a new leader of the sixth form both joined the school in September 2017.

Main findings

You and the school's board of governors have ensured that the school continues to improve towards becoming good. You have demonstrated great strength and skill in creating a culture where the staff feel able to meet the challenge. Teachers believe that the management team supports them well in improving their practice and some say that, as a result, the quality of their teaching is better now than it has ever been. You have ensured that the quality of professional development is good and well targeted on the aspects of teaching and learning that are critical to improving outcomes for pupils in Sutton Academy.

Older pupils currently in the school recognise the improvements that have taken place since you became principal. They say that the improvements to behaviour, secured before the last inspection, have been maintained. They recognise that expectations of how pupils should behave have risen and they feel that rules are more strictly applied. They also say that this is beneficial to them in enabling them to learn better. Year 11 pupils say that there is now no low-level disruption to their lessons. When asked, older pupils said that the best and most consistent teaching is found in the mathematics faculty. Your quality assurance procedures and recent examination results support their view. Conversely, they said that the quality of teaching in science is not as strong as the typical standard across the school. This was an aspect in need of improvement identified at the last inspection. You are taking decisive action to improve the quality of teaching in the science faculty and there are early signs of improvement.

You have ensured that school leaders have further developed their systems for tracking the learning of pupils. You have taken steps to ensure that the accuracy with which teachers assess the progress their pupils make is improving. This better-quality information is providing you, governors and other leaders with more reliable evaluations of the quality of the school's work. An analysis of this tracking information and an examination of current pupils' work show that the progress made both by disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils is improving. Pupils in Years 7 to 10 are seeing the biggest improvements, as Year 11 pupils have much more to do to catch up.

You and other leaders found the external review of the work of the school to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils very helpful. It has helped leaders to more accurately and more frequently evaluate the strategies they deploy to support these pupils. Leaders and teachers have become much more adaptable in seeking to break down the barriers that disadvantaged pupils have to their learning.

Specific training to help teachers push most-able pupils is having a positive impact across most faculties. Teachers have much higher expectations of these pupils, and most are endeavouring to provide them with much more challenging work and requiring them to express their ideas in more detail. Teachers also accept that they each have an important role to play in improving pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills. Again, you have ensured that high-quality training supported staff in adapting their work and they are more confident in deploying strategies to improve pupils' basic skills.

You were aware that many aspects of the curriculum were restricting pupils' achievement, particularly the achievement of most-able pupils. You implemented significant changes to the whole of the key stage 3 curriculum and, throughout the school, to the science curriculum. You have brought the courses offered by the modern foreign languages department more into line with what pupils now learn in their primary schools. These changes are making an important difference to the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school, further driving improvement.

Members of the school's governing body are experienced and skilled in managing improvement in a wide range of industrial, commercial and educational sectors. They have very high expectations of the quality of education provided by Sutton Academy. They have supported you very well in promoting improvement. They also challenge you and other leaders when they believe improvements could be even more significant or more rapid. They are currently paying close attention to improvements made in the sixth form. You and school leaders have refined the curriculum offered in the sixth form, and have made entry requirements to courses more stringent. You have ensured that the quality of teaching has improved in the sixth form as it has across the whole school. Your tracking systems show that pupils on academic A-level courses and applied courses are making strong progress. This represents a significant improvement for those studying A levels.

You and the governors have been keen to respond positively to advice when you consider it of value. You have sought guidance from The Dean Trust to improve some aspects of subject leadership. You have participated fully in an external review of the impact of your spending of the pupil premium funding. You have also accepted guidance on how to alter your school improvement plan. Consequently, it now provides clarity on what specifically has to be achieved and who is responsible for the improvements. The difference each improvement ought to make to outcomes for pupils is documented precisely and this enables accurate evaluations to be made on the success of each aspect of improvement. Actions are timely. The improvements you, governors and senior leaders have achieved so far are embedded in the routines and expectations of pupils and staff alike.

External support

You engaged support from The Dean Trust throughout the last academic year. You asked them to support, in the main, the development of the skills of some subject

leaders. This was successful and those leaders now have much higher expectations of what they, other staff and pupils can achieve. They are also much more able to assess with accuracy the quality of pupils' work.

After the last inspection, you promptly commissioned a report of high quality on the effective use of the pupil premium funding. You have ensured that the recommendations made in that report have driven improvement in the achievement and personal development of disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Mackenzie

Her Majesty's Inspector