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Mr Julian Pollard
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Dear Mr Pollard

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Lowton Church of England High School

Following my visit to your school on 5 June 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:

- build on improvements in teaching and learning in mathematics so that the current trend of improvement is sustained over the long term.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, members of the governing body, staff, pupils and representatives of the Diocese of Manchester and the local authority, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. I also conducted a scrutiny of pupils' workbooks with senior leaders and observed teaching in several mathematics lessons. During the visit, I examined documentation on the progress of pupils currently in the school, including those who are disadvantaged, and discussed

with school leaders the expenditure of additional resources, such as the pupil premium and the Year 7 catch-up fund.

Context

Since the previous inspection there have been several changes to staffing in the mathematics department.

Main findings

There has been a sea change in the direction of Lowton. For too long the school has found it difficult to break through and become a good school. It has now turned a corner and there is a strong tide of improvement. Leaders, including governors, are determined to throw off the 'requires improvement' label and actions they have taken have started to bear fruit.

School leaders have tackled assiduously the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Plans for further development are detailed and focused on the correct priorities. Leaders know the school well and have an accurate view of its strengths and abiding weaknesses.

The assessment system that was in its infancy at the time of the previous inspection has become a powerful tool in driving the school forward. This area of the school's work is led with tenacity. The system is subject to constant review and refinement and as such has been a key factor in improved outcomes for pupils. Information on pupils' progress is collected regularly and examined rigorously by school leaders to spot underperformance. This information helps teachers to identify gaps in pupils' learning and informs their planning so that pupils' needs are met. Teachers know precisely how well each and every pupil is doing and take swift action when they fall behind.

Pupils spoke enthusiastically about the use of assessment in lessons to identify quickly the errors they have made: they find it helpful when teachers then go on to explain how to put these right. School leaders have also used this information highly effectively to increase positive engagement with parents. For example, at recent parents' evenings for Years 10 and 11 the overwhelming majority of parents attended and had purposeful discussions with staff regarding how their children can improve their work and do their very best.

School leaders have established an intensive programme of staff training that has steadily improved the quality of teaching in both key stages 3 and 4. Key messages are conveyed in training sessions and school leaders then check whether these have had an impact on improving classroom practice. In this way, school leaders have ensured that staff apply policies consistently. This was backed up by inspection evidence gathered during this visit; for example, when I examined pupils' books with senior leaders, it was clear that teachers were applying the assessment system

consistently and productively. It was also evident that the work given to pupils has the right level of challenge. As a result, pupils' achievement across subjects and year groups is improving apace.

Improvement in mathematics is palpable. New leadership of this department combined with strong support from senior leaders have had considerable positive impact. Pupils say that teaching has improved and that lessons are more interesting. The head of department leads by example, setting high expectations for pupils and staff alike. Senior leaders have finally succeeded in tackling weak teaching that had been such a persistent stumbling block. The school is looking forward to welcoming new teachers to the department in September.

Lowton has received invaluable support from the mathematics department of Byrchall High School, part of the Makerfield Academy Trust. This has been particularly useful in pinpointing where the weaknesses lay and helping the department to put things right. For example, it was clear that many pupils in the past had not been taught problem-solving effectively. The department developed strategies to ensure that all pupils gain more experience of this aspect of the subject. As a result, pupils are now better prepared to tackle problems in mathematics. According to information provided by the school during this visit, pupils currently taking GCSE in mathematics are on course to do far better than pupils in previous years.

At the time of the previous inspection there were shortcomings in the use of Year 7 catch-up funding. This area of the school's work is now managed much more productively. Information provided by the school demonstrated that pupils in Year 7 who arrived at the school with weak skills in numeracy and literacy have received effective support and the majority have caught up with their peers.

External support

School leaders engage well with the local authority and many fruitful links have been established with other schools. As mentioned earlier, the link with The Byrchall High School has been particularly helpful in steering the mathematics department in the right direction. School leaders have worked productively on assessment with Hawkey Hall High School, part of the Rowan Learning Trust. The dioceses of Liverpool and Manchester have also been helpful in keeping a watchful eye on developments in the school to ensure that rapid improvement remains a top priority.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant
Her Majesty's Inspector