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Miss Rachel Evans
Prestwich Arts College
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Dear Miss Evans

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Prestwich Arts College

Following my visit to your school on 6 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 that 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 not 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 governors are not over-reliant on leaders for information about the school and that they hold leaders to account consistently and effectively
- ensure that leaders' measures of success in the school improvement plan are focused on the impact of their actions on outcomes for pupils
- reduce rates of absence for all pupils, but particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities
- ensure that leaders fully embed the systems to manage pupils' behaviour in order to reduce the proportion of pupils who are excluded from school
- increase rates of pupils' progress across the school, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils
- improve outcomes for pupils in mathematics
- ensure that teachers use assessment information effectively to challenge pupils, particularly the most able pupils.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met yourself as headteacher, other senior leaders, a group of middle leaders, a group of teachers, six members of the governing body and a representative of Bury local authority. During these meetings, I discussed the impact of the actions taken since the last inspection. I also spoke formally with a group of Year 10 pupils and I spoke with pupils informally during social times. I visited lessons in mathematics and English and I looked at work in pupils' books. I evaluated the school improvement plan and leaders' self-evaluation, as well as the external reviews of governance and pupil premium funding. I reviewed a range of school documentation, including leaders' records of attendance and behaviour, and information and documentation relating to the safeguarding of pupils.

Context

Since the previous inspection, nine members of the governing body have resigned, including the chair of governors. Two existing members of the governing body have been appointed as the new chair and vice-chair of governors. There have also been five new appointments to the governing body. Since September, there has been considerable change to the school's leadership structure. You were appointed as headteacher in September 2017. Following your appointment, a new deputy headteacher and a new assistant headteacher have joined the senior leadership team. Four lead practitioners have been appointed in English, mathematics and science at middle leadership level. There have also been considerable changes to staffing, including the appointment of: a teacher of geography, two teachers of modern foreign languages, a teacher of mathematics, two teachers of science, a teacher of performing arts and a teacher of design technology.

Main findings

Leaders and governors recognise that there is much work to do to ensure that the school provides a good standard of education for pupils. This is because, following the last inspection, standards across the school declined. There was a lack of capacity and a deficiency in the skills required to improve the school at every level of leadership.

The decline in standards and the overall quality of teaching is reflected in pupils' outcomes. In 2017, too many pupils made poor progress from their starting points. Examination results for key stage 4 show that pupils' rates of progress were in the bottom 20% nationally. Pupils' progress was particularly poor in mathematics. Pupils' GCSE results in this subject placed the school in the bottom 10% nationally. There were some improvements in some subjects. For example, in humanities, pupils' rates of progress increased. Rates of progress made by most-able pupils also improved slightly. However, these improvements were tentative. The most able pupils still made significantly less progress than pupils did nationally.

During the same year there was a marked increase in other worrying issues, such as rates of pupils' absence. Too many pupils, almost one fifth of the school, were regularly absent from school. This was particularly true of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Blurred lines of accountability compounded the lack of leadership capacity in this area. In addition, staff were unable to address effectively incidents of poor behaviour. As a result, following the last inspection pupils' behaviour deteriorated further.

A major contributing factor to the decline in standards since the previous inspection was the lack of challenge offered by the governing body. During the year that followed the last inspection, the governing body failed in their responsibilities to hold leaders to account effectively. In light of the recommendations made at the previous inspection, the local authority arranged an external review of governance. This took place in the following term. The findings of this review showed that significant changes to the school's governance were essential if governors were to play an effective role in improving the school.

The effective action of the local authority secured a re-formed governing body in July 2017. New governor appointments have since provided a range of skills and expertise. Governors benefit from ongoing training and support. The new governing body has an accurate understanding of the aspects of the school that require improvement. They are committed to securing better outcomes for pupils. Evidence in recent documentation shows that, in the main, governors are challenging leaders more effectively. Increasingly, governors are holding leaders to account for their actions. Nonetheless, governors recognise that there is still work to do to ensure they are not over-reliant on the information provided by leaders.

In light of the recommendations at the last inspection, a timely review of the use of the pupil premium funding took place during the term that followed. However, the actions that leaders took following this review were unsuccessful in securing better outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in 2017. Overall, the progress made by disadvantaged pupils declined and this group made significantly less progress than other pupils did nationally in a number of subjects. This was particularly the case in mathematics. In addition, rates of absence for this group of pupils increased considerably. Almost a third of disadvantaged pupils are regularly absent from school.

Current leaders are under no illusion about the extent of the task that lies ahead of them in the run-up to the school's next inspection. Since your appointment as headteacher in September 2017, you have taken swift and effective action to improve the school. With the support of a strengthened leadership team, you are changing the culture of the school and winning the support of staff and pupils. You have a strong, clear vision and have been open and honest with staff about the need to secure rapid improvement in outcomes for pupils across the school. Pupils and staff share the confidence that the school is improving.

Leaders' self-evaluation shows an accurate understanding of what needs to be done. Plans to improve the school are sharp and precise, with quantifiable measures of impact. However, as the school begins to move forward, leaders must place a greater focus on the impact of their actions on outcomes for pupils. The leadership team have prioritised their actions appropriately. For example, leaders have acted swiftly on the findings of a recent external audit to ensure that safeguarding arrangements across the school are effective. You have been highly proactive in securing a number of staff appointments to increase the capacity and skills of middle and senior leaders. This has helped to ensure that 'the right people are now in the right places'.

Leaders have changed their approach to the spending of pupil premium funding. The senior leader responsible for pupil premium funding is incisive in his approach. There are clear strategies in place and leaders regularly review and refine their actions. This means that leaders' use of funding is increasingly effective. School assessment information shows that differences in the rates of progress made by disadvantaged pupils and other pupils are beginning to close. This is particularly the case at key stage 3. However, leaders are under no illusion that rates of attendance and the outcomes for this group of pupils are still not good enough.

The new leadership team have implemented effective systems and procedures. For example, leaders introduced a new behaviour policy and they have made changes to the school's pastoral structure. There are now clear lines of accountability. The staff I spoke with explained that, following recent changes to the pastoral structure, staff are dealing with incidents of poor behaviour more effectively. School information shows that the proportion of pupils excluded for a fixed period is beginning to decrease. However, the proportion of pupils excluded from school is still extremely high. With effective systems that underpin higher expectations, leaders at all levels are beginning to raise standards. As a result, staff morale is improving.

There is a fresh focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Rigorous systems to check on the quality of teaching are now in place and leaders follow up on their findings from their observations of teaching. The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is beginning to improve because leaders ensure that teachers understand assessment information. Leaders then check that teachers use assessment information to plan learning that challenges pupils. Nonetheless, there is still variation in how effectively teachers use this information to plan learning. High levels of staff absence as well as staff changes have stalled improvements in this area. As a result, many pupils still do not make the progress of which they are capable. This is particularly the case for the most able pupils.

The leadership team are addressing the areas that inspectors identified at the previous inspection. For example, leaders are in the process of making changes to the subjects and courses on offer to pupils. This is particularly the case for pupils who have lower-than-average starting points at key stage 2. Leaders' changes to the

curriculum are already having a positive impact on both the attendance and behaviour of this group of pupils.

There is, without doubt, a greater commitment from pupils, staff and governors to make Prestwich Arts College a good school. Nonetheless, you and your fellow leaders acknowledge that there is considerable work to do to in order for the school to be good. A number of the issues identified at the previous inspection remain.

External support

The current leadership team is keen to move the school forward. Leaders are acting effectively on recommendations made following external support. The school receives ongoing support from the local authority. However, external support has not yet had sufficient impact on improving rates of attendance and outcomes for pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils. Since the previous inspection, another teaching school has completed a review of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. There has also been additional support in both science and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Emma Gregory
Her Majesty's Inspector