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Mr Steve Derham
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Dear Mr Derham

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sycamore Short Stay School

Following my visit to your school on 28 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 management committee members 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.

The school should take further action to:

- continue to refine its assessment system so that leaders are able to analyse and track cohorts of pupils from their starting points and thus ensure that pupils receive the support they need to accelerate their progress
- ensure that key stage 3 schemes of work for English enable teachers to plan lessons effectively so that pupils further develop their writing skills and apply these to extended writing, consistent with current practice in key stages 1 and 2
- extend the role of middle leaders, enabling them to make a further contribution to whole-school improvement
- ensure that pupils have access to science teaching and learning to improve

outcomes in science

- review the length and purpose of the day for key stage 3 pupils to ensure that learning time is maximised.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, three members of the management committee including the chair, a representative of the local authority and an external school improvement consultant to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school's self-evaluation and action plans were evaluated. The lead inspector, accompanied by the headteacher, visited lessons in all key stages. She considered progress evidence, monitoring records, minutes of the management committee, notes of external support and the pupil premium review. She met with a parent and spoke to pupils informally in lessons and around school.

Context

At the time of the previous inspection, the headteacher had been in post for five weeks. Since that time, additional permanent members of staff have been appointed to the school, leading to a reduction in the number of temporary supply staff. The leadership team has been strengthened and middle leaders' roles have been further refined. Middle leaders now hold responsibilities for curriculum and assessment, and are now beginning to contribute to wider school improvement priorities. This work has only recently begun. The management committee has been boosted by the recruitment of several education professionals. The current deputy headteacher is on maternity leave, and her post is being covered temporarily by a recently appointed member of staff with experience in leadership and working with pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. He has strengthened systems to monitor safeguarding to enable all staff to be better informed regarding concerns about pupils. Leaders are in the process of appointing an additional member of staff to support the delivery of interventions to help pupils catch up with their learning. A nurture class group has been established.

The school is currently supporting a number of pupils who have an education, health and care plan as alternative specialist provisions within the borough have not yet been identified for them. As a result, other pupils within the borough who have been permanently excluded are waiting for a place at the school. Leaders and the management committee reported that the school's purpose is not yet clear due to the lack of strategic planning from the local authority.

Main findings

The strong drive and commitment from the headteacher has had a significant impact on improvements to the school since the last inspection. His support for staff and positive modelling of behaviour management has led to an improved culture and ethos, which are palpable in the school. The school provides a calm and orderly environment in which pupils are supported well to manage their behaviour. The learning environment has been enhanced. Previously used 'quiet' rooms are now used for small-group activities or have been reconfigured to provide a library space in which pupils can read. The headteacher has been tenacious in engaging parents through home visits and encouraging pupils to take ownership of their education. As a result, leaders reported that relationships between school and home are much improved. The headteacher's message, 'It's your school and you should be proud of it', is made loud and clear to all.

The management board's increased capacity is having a positive impact on the leadership and management of the school. Members visit the school and work with senior leaders, taking part in learning walks and book trawls. Their first-hand knowledge of the work of the school enables them to challenge leaders more effectively. They have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They have ensured that the school's website is now compliant with the Department for Education's (DfE) expectations of what schools should publish. The school's self-evaluation and action plan are well aligned and identify suitable areas for improvement, shared among senior and middle leaders. Leaders and governors have increased the length of the school day by 30 minutes for pupils in key stage 3. However, it still appears to be rather short.

A review of the use of pupil premium funding was carried out in January 2017 and evaluated that the school's funding was being used appropriately to support this group of pupils. Almost all pupils at the school are disadvantaged, and funding is used to improve attendance, provide breakfast for all pupils, give additional support to improve academic outcomes and provide additional vocational and enrichment activities for pupils. These strategies are having a positive impact on pupils' experiences of education at Sycamore.

Leaders now make use of a wider range of assessment information about pupils' performance. A two-week induction programme for new pupils enables leaders to gather accurate baseline information about pupils' academic and social and emotional levels. As a result, they can identify subsequent gaps in pupils' learning. Leaders use this information to inform the planning of additional support for pupils. Teachers also use this information to ensure that lessons are well matched to pupils' abilities. They provide personalised targets for pupils, and progress towards these is reviewed in every lesson. The school's current progress information shows that the majority of pupils are making good progress in English and mathematics from their varied starting points. Work seen in pupils' books supports this judgement. However, this is not the case for science. Pupils have made less progress in science this year because they have not been provided with any science teaching for part of

the year. Leaders are working to address this as a matter of urgency.

Leaders are still further refining their assessment system and recognise that the information they have about pupils' performance is not yet centralised. They also acknowledge that some of their analysis of progress needs further refinement. This is because of the changing nature of some cohorts throughout the year, linked to pupils' starting and leaving dates. They plan to review their systems further, so that information can be analysed in a more accurate way to inform more focused support.

In lessons and around the school, pupils are supported well to engage in their learning by teachers and teaching assistants. The inspector saw positive behaviour for learning in all classrooms as a result of the strong relationships that exist between staff and pupils. It is clear that staff know and understand the pupils well. Teachers and other staff use questioning effectively to check pupils' understanding of their work and deepen pupils' learning. Work in pupils' books shows that pupils are taking pride in their work. Some pupils were keen to show their work to the inspector. They were able to talk confidently about what they had learned, such as the importance of protecting the local environment in order to protect wildlife habitats. The use of working walls in each classroom is enabling pupils to actively contribute and use ideas and strategies to support their learning.

Leaders have introduced a commercial scheme to improve writing standards in lower school, and this has had a marked impact on pupils' writing. Pupils are supported well to develop their ideas and skills for writing and subsequently apply them to extended pieces of work. Pupils in these classes are writing extended pieces of work on a frequent basis. However, these improved standards are not reflected in key stage 3. Currently, key stage 3 lacks a structured scheme of work for English. As a consequence, while teachers are helping pupils to develop their writing skills and improve their spelling and grammar, pupils are not given enough opportunities to apply these skills and write at length.

Pupils are making good progress in mathematics because they are supported well in their learning. Teachers have strong subject knowledge and plan work effectively to meet pupils' individual needs. The inspector saw pupils consistently supported to develop their mathematical understanding through the use of practical materials. For example, pupils in key stage 3 were developing their understanding of squared and cubed numbers through three-dimensional representations of shapes. In key stage 2, pupils were learning the correct vocabulary for different angles and learning how to measure them using a protractor.

Leaders have revised their marking policy and have introduced 'ladders to success', as a way of assessing pupils' work. Books show that this system is being used consistently throughout the school. Pupils are taking an active role in assessing their own work, and their honest comments about their work and behaviour in lessons show how they are developing their resilience. 'Weekly challenges' form the basis

for homework tasks, and the challenge tree in the hall celebrates pupils' engagement in the challenges, organised and tracked weekly by a member of support staff.

The development of reading skills is a strength of the school because the approach to teaching pupils how to read well has been reviewed and prioritised. Pupils now read on a daily basis through guided reading activities, group work and individual support. The inspector heard pupils reading aloud with confidence. Leaders have invested in separate library areas for every key stage. Staff have promoted the love of reading thoughtfully, knowing that some pupils may be reluctant readers. They have introduced magazines and short books to gain pupils' attention initially, and then have increased the challenge and complexity of texts. Pupils in key stage 3 are currently reading William Golding's 'Lord of the flies'. As a result of the changes to the teaching of reading, pupils have made excellent progress, and their reading and comprehension scores have accelerated this year by an average of two years.

The positive changes to the approach to managing behaviour are evident throughout the school. There is a calm atmosphere in the school, and the inspector saw very little low-level disruption or challenging behaviour. When it did occur, staff dealt with it sensitively and discreetly, skilfully redirecting pupils back to their learning. Pupils told inspectors that 'I'm happy here', and 'Staff understand me better than at my last school.' The number of incidents of physical intervention has reduced significantly since the last inspection and 'positive handling' is now only used as a last resort. Pupils spoke openly about how the school has helped them to manage their behaviour more effectively, and there were comments such as, 'Staff here have helped me not to get angry.' Although there was a rise in fixed-term exclusions last year, these have declined this year.

Pupils are benefiting from a range of enrichment activities provided for them, such as construction-based therapy, drumming, football and outdoor learning. They are able to learn new skills such as canoeing, camping and bush craft. During the inspection, pupils talked about their forthcoming two-night residential visit with interest. All key stage 2 pupils now swim on a weekly basis and all Year 6 pupils have achieved their 25m swimming target, as set out by the DfE.

External support

The school receives monitoring visits from the local authority on a termly basis. It has received additional support for literacy and numeracy from the local authority and there are plans to continue support for literacy. Leaders have recently engaged additional external consultancy support for whole-school improvement. The external consultant has an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and is providing effective support to leaders.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the management committee, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Dudley. This letter

will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deb Jenkins

Her Majesty's Inspector