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Mr Trevor Bowen
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Dear Mr Bowen

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Almondbury Community School

Following my visit to your school on 28 September 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 recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- speed up the pace of improvement in teaching and learning by tightening further the recently introduced quality assurance process
- further improve rates of attendance for all groups of pupils, including those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those who are disadvantaged.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and members of your senior team. I met with one governor and spoke on the telephone with the chair and vice chair of governors. I met with two representatives of the local authority.

I evaluated a range of school documents, including the school improvement plan, leaders' self-evaluation and minutes of meetings of the governing body. I considered documents and information relating to attendance and behaviour. I took into account the school's records of how pupils' progress is tracked and the resulting actions. Records and information relating to the school's work to assess and improve the quality of teaching were scrutinised. Evidence of the quality of teaching and learning was gathered through observations of lessons and scrutinising pupils' work, which we conducted jointly. I met with a group of pupils from Year 2 to Year 11.

I checked the school's records in relation to the safe recruitment of staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection in June 2017, the school has suffered the shock of the unexpected passing of an experienced and long-standing senior member of staff.

At the time of the previous inspection, leaders had recently commissioned an external review of governance, which was completed after the inspection. This led to a restructure of the governing body, with effect from September 2017.

Main findings

Supported by the governing body, you have taken decisive action to improve the quality of teaching. To achieve this, you have used bespoke training for teachers, including that provided by an external organisation, to tackle the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. For example, teachers are increasingly setting work which matches pupils' starting points, including for those who have SEN and/or disabilities and those who are disadvantaged. Also, teachers' use of questions to check on the progress being made by pupils is often effective at drawing out pupils' understanding of more complex and subtle knowledge. This is particularly evident in the way teachers set work and use questions to challenge the most able pupils.

You have taken steps to improve pupils' attitudes to their own learning, with the result that books are consistently well presented, showing the high level of pride which pupils have in their work. Pupils' responses to their teachers' guidance about how to improve are strengthening, although the quality of the responses is less strong for pupils in lower teaching sets.

Pupils told me that they feel challenged most of the time in most lessons, but that this is still variable across subjects and years. Occasionally, a small proportion of teaching continues to fail to engage pupils, with the result that they are bored and do not make sufficient gains in their learning. However, you are aware of where this is the case and appropriate support and challenge is in place.

You have taken action to strengthen the impact of leadership. For instance, you have invested in the professional development of subject leaders through bespoke training with an external partner. You have also enrolled on a nationally recognised professional qualification programme for middle leaders. In addition, you have sought the advice and guidance of a national body for high-quality special educational needs leadership and provision. The external review of pupil premium funding has resulted in a plan which accurately identifies the barriers to learning faced by disadvantaged pupils. At present, the impact of leaders' actions on the progress of disadvantaged pupils is variable, but there are some positive signs of encouragement.

To further strengthen the impact of leadership, you have introduced a quality assurance process. This enables leaders, at all levels, to more effectively track how well pupils are doing. It also helps to hold leaders and teachers to account for this progress. There is evidence, for example, that governors are now challenging senior and subject leaders about pupils' progress. This quality assurance process is effective at identifying which pupils are making less progress than they should be making, and in agreeing the necessary actions to help the pupils to improve. However, at present, there is no systematic checking that these actions have been completed. Additionally, although there is a detailed school improvement plan which accurately identifies priorities and sets out the necessary actions to be taken, the quality of the plans at subject level is less strong. They do not link sufficiently clearly with the whole-school plan. Consequently, the pace of improvement is slower than it could be. Plans and actions are not yet as 'joined up' as they need to be.

As a result of the actions you and other leaders have taken, there are signs of improving outcomes for pupils in the Year 1 phonics screening check, in the key stage 1 national assessments and in the provisional key stage 2 national assessment information. The school's assessment information for outcomes at the end of key stage 4 in 2018 indicates improved pupils' attainment compared to attainment at the end of key stage 4 in 2017. However, despite these 'green shoots', weaker pockets of attainment and progress persist in each key stage and continue to be priorities for improvement.

There are also signs that rates of attendance are beginning to improve as the result of leaders' actions since the previous inspection, although there remains much to do. The attendance of pupils at this point in the year is better than it was at the same point in 2017 and is currently above the national average. The persistent absence of disadvantaged pupils improved by the end of the academic year 2017/18

compared to the year which preceded it. However, while improving, the attendance of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities remains well below that of their peers and continues to be a focus for leaders. You are clear that you need to maintain the improvements which are evident at this early stage of the school year and extend them across the full year. In particular, you must address the decline in attendance of year groups as they move up the school.

External support

Leaders have brokered support for the improvement of teaching through the Pennine Teaching Alliance. Through the same partnership and a new relationship with the National College for Teaching and Leadership, leaders have also started the process of strengthening the quality of middle leadership in the school. The quality of provision for, and leadership of, special educational needs is improving, partly as the result of the links leaders have made with a nationally recognised advisory organisation.

The school is in receipt of a significant level of support from the local authority. This includes financial assistance to fund some of the above actions and the support of two improvement advisers.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector