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Mrs Helen Johnson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Johnson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birkenhead Park School

Following my visit to your academy on 22 November 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, governors and Wirral Academy Trust (WAT) are taking effective action to address 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:

- ensure that the recent changes to the quality of teaching and learning lead to rapid improvements in rates of progress for current pupils
- improve pupils' attainment and progress in science
- review and refine current initiatives to improve attendance.

Evidence

During this inspection, I held meetings with you, your deputy headteacher, other senior leaders, middle leaders, members of the local governing body, including the chair and the chief executive officer of WAT. I also met with the executive headteacher of Weatherhead High School and spoke to a representative of the local authority on the telephone. I spoke formally with a group of Year 10 and 11 pupils. Accompanied by senior leaders, I visited classrooms and scrutinised a sample of pupils' work. I took account of documents provided by senior leaders and evaluated the school improvement plan. I reviewed the school's safeguarding policies and practices and checked the single central record.

Context

Since the last inspection, you have strengthened the senior leadership team by the appointment of three assistant headteachers, who previously acted as associate assistant headteachers and heads of faculty. Roles and responsibilities of senior leaders are now clearly defined. You have appointed new heads of English and mathematics. Some non-teaching staff have been appointed as pastoral leaders. In September 2018, six new teaching staff joined the school. A new chair of governors for the local governing body and a new chief executive officer for WAT have been appointed. Leaders are receiving support from Weatherhead High School, which is a local teaching school.

Main findings

You know your school well and are determined to improve the life chances of pupils in the school. Your high expectations are shared by governors, senior leaders and staff. The school's mission to develop pupils' character drives the work in the school. Actions in your improvement plans are detailed and clear. You and your senior leaders now regularly review and evaluate all actions accurately against criteria for success.

Middle leaders say that they are held accountable by senior leaders. Middle leaders welcome the professional development to develop their skills in monitoring and evaluating their subject areas. They are developing their understanding of the use of assessment information to monitor the progress of pupils more carefully. Middle leaders in English, mathematics and science have been working closely with leaders from a local teaching school. They are collaborating to check that teachers' assessments are accurate and to improve the quality of provision in their subjects.

Provisional results for 2018 and published outcomes for 2017 show that pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, did not make good progress from their starting points. Pupils make strong progress in vocational subjects and in GCSE modern foreign languages. In 2018, attainment and progress in English and mathematics

improved slightly. Pupils' progress in science declined in 2018. This was a surprise to you. You and your team have carefully analysed the reasons for this and have introduced new strategies to improve outcomes in science as a priority. Work in pupils' books and current assessment information show that attainment is improving in a range of subjects, particularly in key stage 3. However, you recognise that further work is required to ensure that all pupils achieve well.

You have made changes to the curriculum so that it is more suited to the needs of pupils. More time is now available to deliver literacy during form periods. Pupils have intervention sessions after school on Mondays. All pupils in key stage 3 now study drama. They also have one period a week on 'character education', which develops the values of positivity, ambition, resilience and thoughtfulness. Middle leaders, including those who lead English, mathematics and science, are reviewing and updating schemes of work. This is to ensure that the curriculum in their subject areas matches pupils' needs more closely during their five years at the school.

Teaching, learning and assessment are improving. Nevertheless, there remains some variability across year groups and subjects. Staff value the training they receive from an external teaching organisation to improve the quality of their practice. Leaders work closely with a local university to provide placements for student teachers. Many student teachers go on to work at the school as newly qualified teachers and some also take on further responsibilities. This 'grow our own' culture ensures a positive impact on improvements in teaching.

My visits to lessons indicated that most teachers are raising their expectations of what pupils can achieve. Pupils behave well in lessons. Most teachers use assessment information to plan learning more effectively to match pupils' abilities. Nevertheless, some lessons lack challenge for the most able pupils. Consequently, these pupils are not achieving as well as they could. Where learning is effective, teachers use their strong subject knowledge to clear pupils' misconceptions. A review of pupils' work shows that most teachers follow the school's assessment policy and allow pupils to reflect on their learning. The development of pupils' literacy skills has a higher profile across the school. However, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their speaking skills where appropriate.

Leaders understand the barriers for disadvantaged pupils well. There is now a greater focus on providing additional support for these pupils. Inspection evidence indicates that the differences between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally are diminishing. However, the progress of these pupils is not strong. Similarly, the higher rate of absence for disadvantaged pupils compared to other groups in school remains a concern.

Your attendance team is working relentlessly to improve the attendance of pupils. As a result, there has been some improvement in attendance. Leaders have raised the profile of the importance of good attendance with pupils and parents through presentations. You have employed a full-time educational welfare officer who works

closely with parents to follow up pupils' absences. Leaders have improved the systems to monitor the attendance of different groups of pupils. However, despite these actions, overall rates of absence and persistent absence remain higher than the national average.

In addition to the areas for inspection, I also looked at safeguarding. The culture of safeguarding at the school is strong. Leaders maintain detailed and accurate records of safeguarding concerns. Staff receive regular training to ensure that their knowledge of safeguarding is up to date. They know what to do if they are concerned about a child's welfare. Referrals are timely. Leaders work well with other agencies to ensure that vulnerable pupils are supported well.

Pupils I spoke to during my visit said that they feel safe. Many pupils join and leave during the school year and are helped to settle in quickly. Some pupils receive mentoring at a local university to raise their aspirations.

Governors are passionate about the school and bring a wide range of skills and experience to their roles. They provide effective support and challenge to leaders. Governors have a strong understanding of the strengths and priorities of the school.

External support

The local authority knows the school well and has brokered strong support from Weatherhead High School, an outstanding school in Wallasey. Wirral Academy Trust has worked successfully with leaders in reducing a budget deficit and in developing a 'character' education programme at the school. Leaders have also brokered effective support from an external teaching organisation and an experienced educational consultant.

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

Yours sincerely

Ahmed Marikar

Her Majesty's Inspector