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Dr Andrew King
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Dear Dr King

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Cove School

Following my visit to your school on 4 December 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 that 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 good.

The school should take further action to:

- improve the consistency with which staff follow your expectations for teaching and learning
- embed the changes already made in the school, ensuring that all actions impact directly on improving pupils' progress.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders and members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone.

The school improvement plan was evaluated. I met with a group of pupils to discuss their work, and spoke to pupils during lessons and at breaktime. With senior leaders, I undertook two learning walks across the school, prioritising the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. I met with a group of middle leaders and teachers to discuss their contribution to the school's improvement. I reviewed a range of documentation, including monitoring reports, school progress information, parental survey information, reports to governors, and information about staff professional development. I also checked the single central record.

Context

During the year since the last inspection several teachers have left the school. This resulted in the school employing some temporary supply teachers. However, you have recruited new permanent staff so that minimal supply cover is necessary. You are currently reorganising your senior leadership team. Two of your assistant headteachers are taking on new roles as deputy headteachers within the school.

Main findings

The considerable turbulence in staffing since the last inspection meant that, last year, actions to improve the quality of teaching were not as effective as you intended. In addition, some of the information you collected about pupils' progress in mathematics was inaccurate, so that some pupils who, in hindsight, would have benefited from further intervention, were not identified quickly enough. Consequently, pupils did not make as much progress as they should have. In particular, pupils in Year 11 made much slower progress than pupils nationally.

This year, you and governors have responded swiftly to restore the upwards trajectory of the school improvement journey. Your restructured senior leadership team demonstrates better capacity to lead the school than in the past. Well-trained subject leaders are starting to take on more responsibility for improving the quality of teaching and rates of progress in their subject areas. A reorganised pastoral structure has helped to improve how pupils' behaviour and welfare are managed in the school.

You have streamlined how staff are held to account at all levels, building in more and better methods to check the accuracy of the information you collect about pupils' progress. These systems are helping you to identify much more clearly the pupils who need extra support to make up for previous poor progress, and you are putting this support in place more promptly than previously.

You have secured suitably qualified, permanent teaching staff throughout the school. Your new leaders of teaching and learning have revitalised the quality of teaching. Well-planned and imaginative professional development is creating a buzz of enthusiasm among staff. Staff are particularly keen to try new ideas and to share examples of good practice with each other. You, leaders and governors are

conscious of the need to continue to monitor the quality of teaching and to hone further the vision for what works best at Cove School, so that teaching quality is consistent throughout the school.

Staff are increasingly following your basic expectations for teaching. For example, they all have access to more detailed information about individual pupils and are starting to use effectively their analysis of classes in their planning. The standard of presentation in pupils' books is much improved. Pupils told me that homework is set more regularly than previously. Teachers demonstrated that they think carefully about tasks set to increase the depth of pupils' understanding of topics taught. However, your feedback policy is not followed well enough by staff, meaning that pupils do not always have a clear understanding of what to do to improve their work.

Your revised behaviour management policy and procedures, coupled with the improvements in teaching, are resulting in much better behaviour across the school. Pupils understand the new system of behaviour points, although they feel that some staff are not using the 'positive points' rewards as often as others. The staff that I spoke with agreed that they need to use this aspect of the policy more consistently. Lessons are now typically calm, focused, and increasingly industrious settings in which to learn. Around the school, pupils are well behaved and polite to each other and to adults. Incidents of poor behaviour are much reduced and low-level disruption is minimal.

All pupils I spoke with were adamant that the quality of teaching has improved substantially this year. Pupils are eager to learn. They appreciate the better teaching that they are experiencing as a result of the improvements you have made. Several reflected that they felt teachers know them better and care about them more than they have in the past. This view was reinforced by the local authority, who noted a definite, positive, 'step change' in the school since September.

Despite recent improvements to the quality of teaching, previous poor-quality teaching means that pupils currently in school have made overall slower progress than they should have. You have put in place several actions to help pupils catch up to where they should be. Extra revision sessions for older pupils are helping to reinforce pupils' understanding of GCSE topics. Additional strategies are in place throughout the school aimed at raising pupils' literacy levels. Pupils now read much more regularly than in the past, both in school and at home. A new spelling programme is helping to widen pupils' vocabulary. Leaders provided evidence to show that these strategies are working as pupils' literacy is improving rapidly. However, much of this work is in its early stages and disadvantaged pupils, in particular, need to make much more rapid progress to achieve in line with national expectations. You recognise this, and are providing additional help for disadvantaged pupils to further increase their rates of progress and raise their self-esteem. Particularly impressive is the work of pupils researching the history of

aviation for the Farnborough Air Show. Pupils are rightly proud that their booklet was used by the organisers, who have commissioned further work from the school for future projects in France.

There is a higher-than-average proportion of most-able pupils in your school. You have started to change the culture of the school by insisting that teachers challenge these pupils effectively. Teachers have received some training in how to do this within their subject areas, including through becoming GCSE examination markers, so that they have a clear idea of the expectations of the new GCSE syllabi. In some departments, 'what a good one looks like' displays show pupils clearly what they need to do to reach their expected grades. Older pupils especially appreciate it when teachers make their expectations for the most able really clear, for example through using examination criteria. However, while there are pockets of strong practice, some staff are not challenging pupils effectively enough. Pupils told me that teachers could raise the levels of challenge for them even more.

You have explored ways to improve the achievement of boys. Two boy-only pupil-voice groups put forward their views, and you have acted on their recommendations. For example, you have amended some of the topics taught to appeal to boys' interests, and changed the rewards system so that pupils can receive 'visible rewards' such as badges, which they appreciate wearing. Last year, you devised a 'football card' programme of mentoring and help for a key group of underachieving boys. This was successful in improving behaviour, attendance and the attainment of the boys in the group. You have refined the programme and are running it again this year. However, boys are still a key sub-group in danger of underachieving, so you are, rightly, continuing to monitor their progress and adapting your school improvement initiatives to ensure continued improvement.

Leaders and governors have an accurate and thorough understanding of the strengths and remaining weaknesses in the school. Governors hold you strongly to account, and you hold staff to account equally strongly, demonstrating through your actions that you are not afraid to take difficult decisions for the good of the pupils. The pupils respect you and other leaders for this. They feel listened to, and know that together you are determined that this school serves them well. The majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, agree. You were disappointed with the rate of improvement seen last year, so have begun this year with renewed rigour. During my visit I saw a real sense of urgency among all staff to secure the necessary improvements to teaching and to pupils' progress. This is important, as although clear improvements are being made, pupils' progress over time has been too slow and there is much still to be done to secure the strong outcomes of which pupils are capable.

External support

You have drawn on a range of external support to help you to make improvements to your school, including participating in various research projects and attending

useful subject-specific training. The local authority improvement officer regularly monitors your work and offers useful feedback.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Old
Her Majesty's Inspector