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Mr Jason Fraser
Principal
Sir William Stanier Community School
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Dear Mr Fraser

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sir William Stanier Community School

Following my visit to your school on 16 October 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken 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 the trust 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:

- governance by the trust board provides effective support and challenge to school leaders in their work to improve the school
- the development of the curriculum, and the learning that this supports, enables pupils to do as well as possible, including in their GCSE examinations
- teachers have the skills they need to build pupils' knowledge and understanding well
- the strategies in place to challenge pupils and their families about unjustifiable absence, and to support good attendance, lead to improved attendance, including for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Evidence

During the inspection, I had discussions with you and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Heath Family (North West) multi-academy trust. I spoke with other senior leaders and middle leaders. These leaders included those responsible for pupils' attendance and behaviour, special educational needs provision and the subject leaders of English, mathematics, science, geography, modern foreign languages and music. I met with groups of pupils in key stages 3 and 4. I also met with the chair and two other members of the local governing body.

I evaluated the school's improvement plan, other planning documents and records of external scrutiny of the school. I also reviewed documents summarising leaders' evaluation of the school. I visited a sample of lessons accompanied by a senior leader.

I held a short discussion with leaders and other staff about the culture of safeguarding in the school.

Context

Since the previous inspection, a vice-principal has left the school and new senior leaders have been appointed. The roles and responsibilities of senior leaders have changed. New leaders for English and mathematics and a new special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) have been appointed.

The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language has increased, as has the proportion of pupils with SEND.

Main findings

The trust has not ensured that improvement in the school has been rapid enough. Until recently, there was too little contact between the trust and the school. Also, the different responsibilities of the trust and the local governing body were not clear enough. The trust has now increased its support and challenge to leaders. Every fortnight, trust staff are checking that improvement is happening as planned.

Leaders have redeveloped or refined many aspects of the school's work since the previous inspection. Senior and middle leaders have worked hard to improve the school. They know the school well and want to do their best for pupils. Leaders are willing to learn and adapt. However, the rate of improvement slowed during the middle of the last school year. Senior leaders therefore redesigned their plans. The current school improvement plan provides a clear set of actions intended to lead to long-term improvement. However, this plan is too recent to see significant impact. The actions taken by leaders in the past have not improved pupils' performance in external examinations or attendance. Both of these aspects of the school's work remain significant concerns.

Senior leadership has been strengthened by the recent changes in these leaders' roles. These roles closely match important aspects of school life. For example, leaders now have responsibility for pupils' behaviour and attitudes and raising achievement. This means that responsibility for improvement is clear.

The new middle leaders for English and mathematics are redesigning the curriculum in these subjects. Other middle leaders have improved their practice. This is, in part, because of the training that senior leaders have organised in partnership with leaders from other schools. Senior leaders make sure that middle leaders have the time to make necessary improvements with their teams.

Teachers use the English and mathematics curriculums to give pupils confidence in using their literacy and numeracy skills in other subjects. Teachers build up pupils' literacy skills in science by helping them to understand and use specialised words. This helps them to answer the written parts of examination questions well. However, they are less confident in using their numerical skills to give the best possible answers.

The school's system for making sure that pupils behave well sets clear expectations for pupils and staff. The way this system worked last school year led to an increase in the number of exclusions. Leaders revised the system. This has led to a decrease in the number of pupils excluded for a fixed period as a result of poor behaviour. Also, the arrangements for any pupils who are in school but working out of their normal lessons following poor behaviour are better. Pupils out of class are expected to continue learning their class's work. Pupils say that the system is stricter, that behaviour has improved and that this helps them to learn.

Leaders have developed new approaches towards teaching and learning. For example, they have set up smaller classes for pupils who find it harder to engage with school in Years 7 to 9. The pupils involved follow the same curriculum as other pupils. They are supported by specialist teachers and teaching assistants. The school's evidence is that this arrangement is better meeting pupils' needs and improving their behaviour. This is allowing those pupils and others to learn more effectively than in the past.

Leaders and staff have put many strategies in place to improve pupils' attendance. For example, staff are working more closely with support agencies outside school. There is now more systematic challenge to parents and carers if pupils are absent. Leaders are checking pupils who say that they feel ill when at school more carefully before allowing them to go home. The attendance of some pupils has improved and the number of long-term absences has decreased. However, the overall attendance this school year has not improved significantly compared to the same stage last year. Attendance remains too low. Leaders judge that one of the reasons for poor attendance is family holidays taken during term time. If pupils are not in school, they cannot benefit from the education provided.

Following discussion between school and trust leaders, school leaders have decided to move away from the trust's pattern for the curriculum. They have started to provide pupils with three years of study in key stage 3 and two years in key stage 4, although the arrangement is different for science. Leaders' aim is to give pupils a broader foundation for their studies in key stage 4 and beyond. They also aim for improved teaching of the knowledge that pupils need to gain better GCSE results. Leaders intend that pupils will have a smooth transition between key stages 3 and 4.

However, these curriculum plans are at an early stage. At the same time as revising the curriculum, leaders have introduced new expectations for how teachers should organise their teaching. Leaders expect pupils to be more involved in their learning than in the past. Pupils say that they often learn well, although whether this happens depends on which teacher they have. Leaders are providing additional coaching for the teachers they judge to be less effective. Many of these changes have been made during the current school year. This means that Year 11 pupils in 2019 were not able to benefit. The published but unconfirmed GCSE results for these pupils indicate that their progress was weaker than that of the previous Year 11. The performance of pupils in both of these cohorts indicated that they had made poor progress during their time at the school.

Leaders have redeveloped the support that is offered to pupils with SEND since the previous inspection. Leaders now ensure that teaching assistants work more closely with pupils who have the greatest need. This has allowed staff to develop a better knowledge of individual pupils. The new SENCo has ensured that all teachers have high-quality information about pupils with SEND and the best ways to meet their needs. There are now more pupils with identified SEND. This is because staff are identifying pupils' needs more accurately. As well as this, an increasing number of pupils with SEND are joining the school. The attendance of pupils with SEND has increased but is still much lower than the attendance of others. As a result, many of these pupils do not attend regularly enough to learn well.

External support

The trust has not provided sufficient support to the school. However, school leaders have worked with other local schools, including teaching schools, another academy trust and the Department for Education, to provide specialist training and other support. This has been helpful to leaders as they have developed their practice and the work of the school. This support did not lead to improved performance from pupils in the 2019 external examinations.

I am copying this letter to the chair and the CEO of the Heath Family (North West)

multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire East. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector