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15 November 2019

Mrs Susan Hamilton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hamilton

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Washington Academy

Following my visit to your school on 7 November 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in April 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive

officer (CEO) of the trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sunderland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in April 2019.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - writing and communicating a school improvement plan that sets an appropriate timescale for planned changes to be made and how the effect of these changes will be monitored and evaluated
 - implementing strategies for the use of the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding and checking that they have a positive effect
 - reviewing the quality of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), including reviewing the quality of the additionally resourced provision on pupils' progress and development
 - adopting the revised safeguarding policy and delivering associated training to all staff.
- Improve the standard of pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - working with families to rapidly improve attendance and reduce the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent
 - taking further steps to reduce bullying and increase pupils' confidence that bullying will be dealt with effectively
 - eliminating the low-level disruption and antisocial or boisterous behaviour that continue to undermine the school culture in some lessons and at social times
 - reducing the overall level of exclusions from the school
 - extending the provision for pupils' personal development across all year groups so that pupils' appreciation of personal safety and citizenship strengthens.
- Improve rates of progress and levels of attainment by:
 - introducing a more carefully planned and sequenced curriculum which ensures that important content within each subject is covered in enough depth and detail
 - ensuring that assessments are used more appropriately to gauge pupils' grasp of topics and to support pupils' recall of the content covered
 - checking more closely on the quality of work to support pupils with lower levels of attainment in reading
 - providing more support for pupils with SEND, both in mainstream lessons and within the additionally resourced provision
 - ensuring that the work set for pupils is pitched correctly and is not too easy for the most able.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 7 November 2019

Evidence

I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, headteacher, CEO of the trust, chair of the governing body and subject leaders, in addition to other senior and trust staff. I spoke on the telephone with two trustees. I spoke to a group of Year 9 and 11 pupils formally and other pupils in lessons. I conducted joint lesson visits across the school with the headteacher and a trust leader. During this inspection, I focused specifically on pupils' behaviour and attitudes, the quality of education and leadership and management.

Context

This was the first monitoring visit since the school's section 5 inspection in April 2019. Since the inspection, a new CEO has been appointed to the trust. Following a skills audit, three new governors have joined the governing body. An interim senior leader with responsibility for pupils' pastoral development has been appointed. In addition, an interim new senior leader with responsibility for the quality of education has been appointed on a temporary basis from within the trust. Currently, she is supporting teachers across the school. The remit of the subject leader of business has been widened to include careers, personal, social, health and economic education and enterprise. A behaviour manager and attendance manager took up post in September 2019.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

The quality of training teachers receive has improved since the last inspection. Leaders now ensure that staff receive training that is closely matched to their needs. Staff appreciate this and the many opportunities to contribute to professional development sessions in the school and across the trust. Consequently, there is some secure evidence that teachers are more effective in the classroom. Pupils say that teachers give them more time now to go over their previous learning. Subject leaders have a strong understanding of how pupils learn. This has ensured that curriculum plans are well considered and sequenced. In lessons, some teachers use ambitious vocabulary and expect a lot from pupils. For example, in a Year 9 history lesson, the teacher used the word 'autonomous' when describing the similarities and differences between the French and Russian revolutions. Pupils demonstrated a sound understanding of this and other challenging vocabulary because they are encouraged to speak in this way. However, inspection evidence and pupils' perceptions highlight that this and the quality of education vary between subjects.

Pupils' behaviour is much improved. Teachers in some subjects, such as history and technology, trust pupils to work together, share ideas and work independently for longer periods of time. In other lessons, teachers are not confident enough to 'let

go of the reins' yet. In these lessons, teachers plan for compliance, and opportunities for pupils to explore, discuss and learn from any mistakes are limited. The most able pupils are disproportionately affected because they are often ready to move on or apply their understanding to different situations. Work is not as challenging for these pupils as it could be.

In the last 18 months, a large number of pupils have been taken off the school's admissions register to be educated at home. Discussions with leaders, analysis of parental communications and discussions with the representative from the local authority demonstrate that parents and carers are robustly discouraged from taking this action. Leaders have successfully managed to reintegrate some pupils back into school after a short period of time away, when parents have reconsidered their options.

Pupils' attitudes to learning are more positive than they used to be. While leaders are pleased with progress in this regard, they are not complacent. In lessons, most pupils are attentive and respond swiftly to teachers' requests. Pupils say that behaviour is much better. However, they also say that the standard of pupils' behaviour depends on which lesson they have or how strict their teachers are. This highlights that the new behaviour policy is not used consistently across the school.

The proportion of pupils who are excluded for a fixed term has reduced significantly. For example, since the start of this academic year, there have been 26 fixed-term exclusions. This compares to 45 in the same period last year. A small minority of pupils continue to display more challenging behaviour. Boys and disadvantaged pupils continue to be the most likely pupil groups to be excluded. The new behaviour management policy encourages staff and pupils to discuss pupils' conduct to get to the root of the problem. Pupils and staff say that, when used effectively, this is helping to improve relationships and reduce the need to exclude. However, pupils are clear that, should they step over the line or consistently misbehave, they are likely to be excluded. In this way, leaders use exclusions appropriately and only when all other avenues have been exhausted. Nevertheless, leaders know that the number of pupils who have been permanently excluded recently is too high.

At the time of the previous inspection, parents were concerned with the number of bullying incidents and the school's response in this regard. Recently, leaders have appointed a member of staff with responsibility for the management of pupils' behaviour. Furthermore, staff now record and track their response to allegations of bullying more quickly than they used to. Checks are made to ensure that all allegations or incidents of bullying are dealt with on a daily basis. Senior leaders analyse and discuss behaviour data regularly. This ensures that pupils in need of support receive it without delay. Communication with parents has improved. As a result, parents are alerted promptly when pupils are involved in an altercation or disagreement. The school's own information demonstrates that bullying occurs less often than it used to. The views of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, highlight that more parents are satisfied with the

school's response to bullying than at the time of the previous inspection. However, some still feel that there is more the school can do.

Leaders have worked hard to improve attendance. They have introduced a wide range of rewards and incentives to encourage pupils to attend school more often. This is beginning to bear fruit. The new attendance manager is working closely with pupils who, historically, have not attended school as often as they should. Persistent absence is reducing for most pupil groups but there is still work to do to ensure that disadvantaged pupils attend school more. There remains a small group of pupils who rarely attend school. This, in part, contributes to rates of attendance that, while improving, continue to be below the national average.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

Leaders responded swiftly to the areas for improvement highlighted in the previous inspection report. School improvement plans are thorough. Leaders have carefully considered how to, and who should, focus on each area. While plans are ambitious, actions to improve the school are distributed evenly between staff and across the year. In this way, plans are manageable and well placed to have a positive effect on the quality of education pupils receive.

Leaders' plans to support disadvantaged pupils are comprehensive. Leaders understand clearly the barriers to learning disadvantaged pupils face during their time at school. An external review of pupil premium spending is scheduled to take place before the end of November. Leaders intend to use the recommendations from the review to refine and improve their published plans.

Staff morale is high. This is a huge turnaround in a relatively short space of time. Staff say that they are trusted to do their job and that 'Leaders want them to flourish.' Staff are encouraged to attend senior leadership meetings and share ideas or concerns. This has helped to build a sense of teamwork within the school. Staff say that the lines of communication between leaders and staff are much improved. Trust and senior leaders place staff well-being at the heart of all they do. This is appreciated by staff, who say that the new executive headteacher and the headteacher, in particular, regularly 'check in' on them and ensure that administrative tasks are reduced to a minimum.

Governance is strong. Leaders from the trust recently commissioned an external review of governance in the school and across the trust. This led to changes in the scheme of delegation and ways that trustees and governors work. Trustees are knowledgeable. They have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They do not readily accept information from leaders. Trustees have introduced a number of initiatives to quality-assure and test the validity of the information they receive. Consequently, leaders say that they are held to account regularly. Inspection evidence confirms this to be the case.

The quality of provision for pupils with SEND is improving. Leaders have acted on the findings from a recent local authority review of SEND provision. Pupils with SEND who attend the enhanced mainstream provision are now supported more often by subject teachers. Systems and procedures to assess and support pupils with SEND are more appropriate. Teachers are planning lessons that are more effective at meeting the needs of pupils with SEND than in the past. Consequently, pupils with SEND are engaging more and achieving more in their lessons now.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The quality of staff training has improved. Training is more varied and tailored to the needs of individual staff. This is helping to improve teachers' understanding of how pupils learn and retain knowledge over time.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are much better than they used to be. This ensures that more lessons are calm and purposeful.
- The number of pupils who are excluded for a fixed term has reduced considerably. Staff and pupils have more discussions about learning and behaviour than they used to. This is helping to keep pupils in lessons and in school.
- Rates of attendance are improving for some pupil groups. The new leader with responsibility for attendance continues to work closely with pupils and families to ensure that pupils with poor attendance come to school more often.
- Levels of bullying have been reduced significantly. Leaders' monitoring and recording have improved in this regard. This is helping to ensure that issues are resolved swiftly.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The quality of education pupils receive across the school continues to vary. Some teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. This leads to some pupils, especially the most able, not achieving as well as they could.
- One in four disadvantaged pupils is persistently absent from school. This has not improved since the previous inspection.
- A minority of parents still have concerns about bullying in the school.
- The school's behaviour policy is not used consistently across the school. This leads to variability in the quality of pupils' behaviour. Boys and disadvantaged pupils continue to be the most likely pupil groups to be excluded.
- Leaders are responding appropriately. However, the number of pupils who are removed from the school's admissions register to be educated at home is high.

External support

Leaders have drawn upon considerable support from within the trust. Nevertheless, they are not afraid to look further afield if necessary. Leaders have brokered support from two experienced staff from outside the trust to lead the upcoming pupil premium review. Additionally, representatives from the local authority completed a comprehensive review of provision for pupils with SEND. This has improved school improvement plans and ensured that pupils with SEND are supported more effectively.

Wider external reviews of the school's use of assessment and safeguarding arrangements have been concluded recently. Again, the recommendations from these reviews have helped leaders to refine their ways of working, to improve development plans and to tighten up systems and procedures when checking the suitability of staff to work with children.