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Mr Mark Kingswood
Fernhill School
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Dear Mr Kingswood

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Fernhill School

Following my visit to your school on 7 January 2020, 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 three 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 breadth of the curriculum for pupils in Year 9
- increase the proportion of pupils who study a modern foreign language at GCSE
- improve governors' strategic understanding of the overall structure of the curriculum in the school, and of the impact of funding for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, other senior and middle leaders and a group of governors, including the chair of governors, to discuss the actions taken since the

last inspection. I spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone. I evaluated the school's improvement plan.

In addition, I made short visits to a range of lessons with an assistant headteacher. I met with pupils and looked at their work. I met with a group of staff. I considered a range of documentation. I checked the single central record.

Context

At the time of the last inspection, the headteacher and his reorganised senior leadership team had been in post for under a month. Since the previous inspection, curriculum leadership has been reorganised so that there are now subject leaders rather than faculty leaders. The leadership of the pastoral system has also been reorganised and there is now a head of each year group. Several middle leaders are new to their roles since the last inspection. The headteacher has significantly reduced the use of temporary, agency teachers by recruiting 13 permanent, specialist teachers since September 2018.

Main findings

Although yet to be reflected in published outcomes, this school is on the right trajectory to be judged as good at the next section 5 inspection. Senior leaders and governors have made a good and secure start in making the improvements necessary to ensure a good quality education for pupils. In particular, the quality of middle leadership, subject planning and teaching is improving strongly. Leaders demonstrate the capacity to make the further improvements needed.

After the last inspection, leaders and governors wisely prioritised improving the quality of staffing in the school. They have successfully overcome local geographical recruitment difficulties to secure several permanent, suitably qualified teachers, so that there are now far fewer temporary and non-specialist teachers. Leaders have reorganised the leadership structure to make better use of staff expertise. The headteacher has also reviewed how the school manages staff performance to ensure clear lines of accountability and to make best use of the most experienced teachers. These changes are contributing strongly to the improvements seen in the school.

Well-trained subject leaders have made a strong start in developing the curriculum content of their subjects at both key stage 3 and key stage 4. In particular, key stage 3 subjects are structured so that they are now more closely aligned to the national curriculum. Leaders are ensuring that pupils learn subject content in a logical order. For example, in English, reading has rightly been prioritised in both key stages. English leaders ensure that the texts and topics that pupils study at key stage 3 provide a strong foundation for their GCSE work, without being repetitive. In mathematics, there are better structures in place for teachers to spot any gaps in pupils' understanding and to work quickly to address these.

Leaders have also focused on improving teaching strategies. Teachers have raised their expectations of what pupils can achieve, providing more structured support where necessary. Teachers now place a high priority on making sure that pupils learn and are able to recall subject content as they progress through the curriculum. A more consistent approach to assessment and feedback is helping teachers to know how well each pupil is doing and to identify any extra support they might need. Pupils' confidence in their learning is also improving as a result of this approach.

Leaders set out clearly their key expectations for teachers' work. Well-placed support from the local authority is helping subject leaders gain a better understanding of their role in improving the quality of teaching, the curriculum and pupils' outcomes. Well-planned professional development and training is supporting teachers' practice. A secure programme of monitoring and mentoring is enabling leaders to know how well their expectations are being implemented. As a result, inconsistencies in the quality of teaching are reducing.

The school is developing its understanding of the precise and different needs of disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Work begun since the previous inspection is allowing leaders and teachers to put in place more targeted support to help these pupils achieve and succeed. Leaders are starting to monitor the impact of this work. Further work is planned to reorganise how teachers and teaching assistants work with pupils with SEND to best support their individual needs.

Leaders and governors recognise that pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, have underachieved in the past. The work being done to improve the curriculum and teaching for current pupils is making a positive difference. Pupils' work shows that more is expected of pupils, and that all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, are learning much more as a result. Pupils themselves are adamant that they have noticed significant improvements in the quality of teaching and the content of their lessons. Leaders' monitoring supports this view. However, leaders recognise that several pupils in Year 11 need extra support to make up for previous poor experiences of teaching and the curriculum. Work is under way to help pupils to catch up in English and mathematics, as well as to support their learning in other subjects. This includes through providing extra revision sessions and improved use of tutoring and mentoring.

Pupils' attendance is better than it was at the last inspection. Overall attendance now matches the national average. This is because of leaders' effective work to monitor pupils' attendance, to understand the reasons for any absences and to be more proactive in addressing dips in attendance. Substantial reductions in persistent absence have also been made, although leaders recognise there is still a way to go to reduce this further.

At the last inspection, exclusion was used too frequently. Leaders have worked effectively to substantially reduce the use of exclusion. They have been successful

largely because of a more consistent use of the behaviour management system, and through more careful consideration of how to meet the needs of a small group of pupils who require additional support to manage their behaviour. Leaders' work to improve the quality of teaching and of the curriculum has also improved behaviour. As one pupil told me, 'We get on with our learning better now because teachers are more organised. We know what to expect in all our subjects now. Teachers know us better and so we behave better.'

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and remaining weaknesses in the school. You recognise that there is more work to do to review the structure of the curriculum as a whole. Currently, pupils experience a narrowed key stage 3 curriculum, because they can choose to reduce the number of subjects they study during Year 9. This also then limits the choice of which subjects they can take at GCSE in Years 10 and 11. One major impact of this is that far too many pupils stop learning a modern foreign language at the end of Year 8. Leaders are currently deciding how best to implement the changes they need to make so that all pupils have access to a broad curriculum in Year 9, and that the uptake of a modern foreign language increases.

Governors strongly support leaders in the improvements they have made to the school, particularly in securing more permanent staffing. Governors have accessed extra training so that they are able to ask better questions of leaders about whether teaching and the curriculum are improving and how leaders know this. They now need to refine their approach further. Governors need a more strategic oversight of the curriculum structure as a whole. They also need to ensure that they have a better understanding of the impact that additional funding has on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND.

External support

The local authority has provided a range of support for the school. This has been particularly useful in improving the quality of middle leadership. Middle leaders now have a better understanding of the impact they need to have to improve the quality of the curriculum, teaching, outcomes and behaviour in the school. The school has made good use of targeted support to improve the quality of the curriculum in English, mathematics and science.

Governors have accessed some useful training provided by the local authority. However, more support to improve the quality of governance would benefit the school, particularly to support their understanding of the quality of the curriculum in the school.

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