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Anna Stevenson
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Dear Mrs Stevenson

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Birches Green Junior School

Following my remote inspection with Ian Tustian, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 3 and 4 February 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require special measures.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 (coronavirus) lockdown restrictions, this monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school was judged to require special measures at its previous section 5 inspection. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in July 2019.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Context

- Since the previous inspection, there have been some significant staff changes. In January 2020, you were appointed as interim headteacher. Several teachers have left and new staff have been appointed. A new leader for special educational needs and a new curriculum leader have been appointed. The governing body has been replaced by an interim executive board, and this is still in place. In 2019, the school was made subject to an academy order but this has not yet been actioned. In the meantime, the school has established a working partnership with Birches Green Infant School.
- During autumn 2020, just over two thirds of pupils received remote education at some point in the term.
- At the time of this inspection, about a fifth of pupils were being educated in school. Pupils identified as being vulnerable and one fifth of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) were attending school.
- At the time of this inspection, no staff were absent from work due to COVID-19. A small number of staff were working from home because of COVID-19-related reasons.

Main findings

- Before the pandemic, leaders had already begun making sweeping changes to the school's curriculum. A programme of staff training had been initiated, and staff had mapped out what they wanted pupils to know and remember. During this inspection, staff showed inspectors how this newly established planning is being used to inform the current curriculum offer. Pupils learning at home continue to cover the planned content in the usual order. However, some activities in art, design and technology, and music, for example, have been changed to make them more manageable in a home environment.
- Curriculum planning in terms of what is taught when has improved. Subject leaders know there is still more work to be done, especially in the foundation subjects. Leaders are aware of the risks to learning caused by the current situation. For example, pupils are doing a lot of work on laptops which means they may fall back in writing and lose the stamina for lengthy written tasks. Leaders accept that those pupils who are physically in school could be doing more writing and using laptops less.
- Pupils in school say that they are studying all their usual subjects and feel that they are continuing to make progress. They report that the level of challenge in lessons has increased over time. In mathematics, for example, pupils now do 'twist it and deepen' activities. These require them to apply reasoning and deepen their understanding rather than rushing on to something new. Staff and pupils say this is giving them a more secure knowledge base to build upon.

- About one third of pupils speak English as an additional language. Leaders have been mindful of this when choosing resources for remote education. The school's chosen online platform has a strong pictorial element that assists ease of access. Furthermore, bilingual staff are available to speak with families and pupils, and do so regularly to check they are safe, well and managing the work set.
- Staff keep a careful eye on pupils' engagement with remote learning. They monitor virtual attendance closely so they can spot patterns and solve any problems. As a result, pupils' participation in remote learning has increased steadily. From around 60% engagement at the start of term, the figure has risen to around 85%.
- Leaders make sure that pupils with SEND are receiving appropriate education, either on site or at home. Teaching assistants are available to provide additional support for remote learning. In addition, staff training and new leadership in this area are bringing improvements to the curriculum and in-school support for these pupils.
- Whether at home or in school, teachers provide opportunities for pupils to read and enjoy books. The school's curriculum plans for English identify many good-quality texts and how and when these should be used. That said, leaders know there is more to do to support pupils working at home to read with the same regularity as those in school.
- The interim executive board presents as capable and ambitious. Board members have made informed decisions about spending on resources to support remote learning. They also meet regularly with leaders to check the impact of school improvement plans and changes to the curriculum. They ask the right questions and know what is working well and where further work is needed.
- The interim headteacher has strengthened the partnership with Birches Green Infant School. This is helping to improve subject leadership and pupils' learning across the curriculum. In addition, support from school improvement partners and the local authority has steered the school in the right direction. The development of a more systematic approach to curriculum planning has helped the school to provide meaningful remote education.
- Staff agree that the school is improving and understand expectations for providing remote education. Uncertainty about the permanent leadership arrangements at the school is causing some anxiety among staff and parents.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. Inspectors held meetings with the interim headteacher, two assistant headteachers, other leaders and members of staff, a

school improvement partner and five members of the interim executive board to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

Inspectors also talked with pupils, observed some pupils reading with an adult and looked at curriculum plans. They looked at pupils' work and watched excerpts from recorded online lessons.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector