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Tim Bennett
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Dear Mr Bennett

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Windlestone School

Following my remote inspection with Kirsty Godfrey, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 26 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 have serious weaknesses.

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 November 2019.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) 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.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- have a strategic oversight of reading, to ensure that leaders and staff have sufficient expertise to provide more effective support for pupils who are in the early stages of learning to read. Additional support should address pupils' precise phonic gaps, and give pupils plenty of practice in applying what they have learned by reading books which match their phonic knowledge.

Context

- Since the previous inspection, the local authority (LA) has dissolved the governing body and replaced it with an interim executive board (IEB). An LA senior leader is seconded to support senior leaders. Appointments have been made to a range of posts, including two senior leaders, a special educational needs coordinator, a pastoral leader and a school business manager. There is a current consultation process to close the school as of September 2021.
- Across the autumn term 2020, a very small proportion of pupils had to be educated remotely.
- At the time of this inspection, just over one third of pupils were being educated on site. All pupils on roll have an education, health and care (EHC) plan and all pupils are considered vulnerable. Leaders are in regular contact with all pupils and their parents and carers if not attending on site.

Main findings

- Leaders have taken effective action to provide an education in the current circumstances. Prior to the pandemic, you had taken steps to address the weaknesses in your curriculum identified at the previous inspection. Leaders, supported by the LA and your education development partner (EDP), had written programmes of study for each subject. You had organised these programmes into half-termly and then weekly topics by thinking through the order of when particular curriculum content should be taught.
- You have based your remote learning curriculum on your pre-pandemic programmes of study. In places, you have had to amend the curriculum due to the restrictions caused by COVID-19. For example, you have made appropriate changes to the sequence of some science units owing to the limitations of doing practicals and experiments, including at home. In English, you took steps to identify that for your pupils, teaching full texts remotely was not a desirable course of action. You have amended the curriculum so that specific skills, such as grammatical skills, are taught in readiness for the resumption of full on-site education.
- You have taken effective action to provide education for vulnerable pupils in school, as well as for those pupils being educated remotely. For example, you have ensured that all pupils on site are supported in their remote learning by

a teaching assistant. When pupils access a 'live' lesson remotely from home, you have put appropriate support in place by ensuring that there are always two teachers present in the lesson. This is a sensible action, because it supports pupils in behaving well towards one another while online, and it provides an extra pair of hands to assist with the learning.

- Although all of your pupils have an EHC plan for needs associated with their social, emotional and mental health, you have correctly identified that some pupils have difficulties with their reading. To address this, you have introduced commercially available reading programmes. You have used these to identify weaknesses in language understanding and in 'decoding' words. Pupils are given small-group or individual support with a focus on developing their self-confidence and reducing anxieties.
- However, although well intentioned, there is not a strategic enough approach to teaching children to read. Staff do not have sufficient expertise in teaching children in the early stages of reading. For example, extra support does not always address pupils' precise phonic gaps, and the reading books do not always match pupils' phonic knowledge.
- You have taken decisive action to ensure that almost all of Year 11 pupils are attending on site. You have done this so that, as far as is reasonably practicable, they can continue to receive their normal curriculum as they proceed towards their end of key stage 4 accreditation.
- As a special school, you have prioritised the necessary support for all of your pupils. Through your 'team around the school' approach, you have ensured that the required support from external professionals remains in place. For instance, appointments with the education psychology, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services have continued.
- The IEB provides strong support and challenge to leaders. The LA has ensured that the IEB members are highly skilled and experienced education leaders with an understanding of Windlestone School's context. The IEB knows when it needs to act strategically, and when it needs to work more closely with leaders on a day-to-day basis. As a result, it provides effective oversight of leaders' actions in the current circumstances.
- The LA has made the school a priority for support. It has put in place substantial support, including the secondment of a senior leader to work closely with leaders and the appointment of an experienced partner to advise leaders in your work. The LA keeps the school under tight scrutiny, at the most senior level. Consequently, the LA is taking effective action to support and challenge leaders.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, pupils, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance, a representative of the local authority and the school's EDP to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also visited examples of the school's remote learning curriculum, accompanied by leaders, and discussed what the school is doing to support the weakest readers. We met with the school's external anti-bullying ambassador to explore leaders' actions to reduce incidents of bullying. We discussed with leaders the actions they take to check that pupils are safe when working remotely and on site, including at the Personalised Alternative Curriculum Centre. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 31 staff questionnaires.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector