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Chris Chorlton
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Dear Mrs Chorlton

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Mercenfeld Primary School

Following my remote inspection with insert Phil Garnham, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 25 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.

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 have serious weaknesses at its previous section 5 inspection. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in October 2018.

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.

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

- ensure that leaders of subjects other than English and mathematics have the opportunity to evaluate the curriculum in their subject across the school, with guidance and support as appropriate
- make sure that the weakest readers are given books that they can read fluently because they are matched consistently and accurately to the sounds they already know.

Context

- The current headteacher joined the school in September 2020. Since the last inspection, there has been considerable turbulence in staffing, with many new appointments, including teaching staff. There have also been four new appointments to the local governing body.
- During the autumn term, only a very small proportion of pupils were educated remotely.
- Currently, around half of pupils are receiving remote education. This includes around six in ten pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Around eight in ten vulnerable pupils are attending school.

Main findings

- Before the school partially closed to pupils in March 2020, leaders were improving the education for pupils. Staff have been trained to be more effective when teaching mathematics and writing. Leaders have introduced a new curriculum. Teachers can now be clear about what they want pupils to learn. They are able to build pupils' knowledge over time through sequences of lessons. As the new headteacher, you are continuing to help those teachers whose skills are still developing. The 'Mercenfeld Way' has given guidance to all staff on how to work in a shared way. Expectations are higher and clearer than previously and leaders of subjects have defined roles and responsibilities. As you have identified, these leaders do not yet know how well their colleagues across the school are teaching each subject.
- Before the current lockdown, staff had learned to use an online learning platform. This meant that they could switch to using this platform immediately it was required. The remote education reflects the curriculum teachers are delivering in school. It includes all subjects the school usually offers. However, teachers have rescheduled some things until all pupils are back in school. This includes, for instance, learning musical instruments. In the meantime, teachers are using imaginative ways for pupils to learn things. For example, some pupils have 'visited' Chester Zoo by watching video lessons of a keeper showing them red and giant pandas.

- Every pupil can see a timetable of the work teachers expect them to do. All receive at least two 'live' lessons per day. In addition, there is also pre-recorded work, as well as assemblies to view. Staff provide challenges in, for instance, art and design, and physical education. Lessons we saw showed teachers explaining things clearly and confidently. Work is challenging for pupils. Those in Year 2 are asked to find a mistake when someone tries to subtract 26 from 42. Much of the education pupils are receiving explains new things. Other activities recap things teachers know pupils have forgotten.
- Staff ensure that they are in regular contact with pupils. They stay online after lessons to discuss work with them, and explain things if pupils are unsure. This is helping to keep relationships positive and reduces pupils' anxieties. Teachers can also see the work pupils complete and are able to give them prompt feedback.
- Children in the early years, and pupils in Year 1 and 2, receive daily phonics lessons. Staff note when a pupil does not know a sound well enough and give them brisk support to learn it. Although many pupils receive appropriate reading books to help them to practise, this is not always the case. Staff give some of the weakest readers books that are too hard for them to read. When this happens, it risks these pupils not gaining the confidence they need.
- You ensure that staff provide education for the children of key workers and to vulnerable pupils. Subject leaders provide reports explaining to you how this is being delivered. There are specific activities and one-to-one sessions for vulnerable pupils. You have provided laptops to families so that every pupil can access lessons. Those pupils with SEND are also monitored closely. The coordinator of these pupils checks the work they are receiving meets their needs. Teachers are required to explain how they ensure that all pupils are included.
- The local governing body is helping both to support and challenge you. They check the information you give them with updates from the multi-academy trust. They meet via videocalls to discuss the education of pupils and ask you questions. The trust has provided much support to the school over time. Recently, they have checked the quality of the remote education staff are providing. A lead practitioner is working with you and staff to improve the curriculum further.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, the acting leader of the early years, and subject leaders for reading, mathematics, science, and for personal, social and economic education; the director of schools of the Bradgate Education Partnership multi-academy trust; a lead practitioner of the trust working at school, and representatives of the local governing body to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also undertook 'visits' to recorded lessons, scrutinised examples of pupils' work submitted as part of their remote education, heard a sample of pupils read, and looked at a range of curriculum documentation. We studied responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including nine free-text responses, and 39 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Bradgate Education Partnership multi-academy trust, the regional school's commissioner and the director of children's services for Leicestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Roary Pownall
Her Majesty's Inspector