

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Susan Hamilton
Headteacher
Washington Academy
Spout Lane
Washington
Tyne and Wear
NE37 2AA

Dear Mrs Hamilton

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Washington Academy

Following my remote inspection with Eleanor Belfield, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 3 March 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 have serious weaknesses at its previous section 5 inspection. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in April 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:

- ensure that the staff involved in supporting the very weakest readers are trained in a single system of phonics, and that it is this system which is used consistently to help pupils in the early stages of reading.

Context

- Since the previous section 5 inspection, you have appointed two senior leaders, including a very recently appointed special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). Four trust-appointed governors and three staff/parent governors joined the governing body. A new chief executive officer of the trust was appointed.
- At some point during the autumn term 2020, almost 90% of pupils had to be educated remotely. During this period, Year 10 had a higher rate of COVID-19-related absence than other year groups.
- At the time of this inspection, around 10% of pupils were being educated on site. Just over 50% of vulnerable pupils and around 75% of pupils with an education, health and care plan were being educated on site.
- At the time of this inspection, a very small proportion of staff were absent for COVID-19-related reasons. Leaders are managing staff absence mainly through a combination of internal cover arrangements and staff working from home.

Main findings

- Prior to the onset of the pandemic, you had completed a process of returning to a three-year key stage 3 and a two-year key stage 4. With the support of the trust, subject leaders had written five-year programmes of study, based on the national curriculum. As such, you were in a strong position to consider how your curriculum could be adapted for your remote learning curriculum. You have made appropriate decisions about how to amend the order in which some topics are taught, such as in practical subjects, where pupils' access to equipment and materials at home is restricted by COVID-19 limitations. Year 11 pupils are all following the same courses as at the start of Year 10.
- You are largely following the 'normal' timetable for key stage 4 pupils, with the same number of daily 'live' lessons in the same timetabled subjects. At key stage 3, there is more of a 'blended' approach, with a combination of remote live lessons and recorded lessons. We saw some effective practice in the remote provision, such as the harnessing of technology to provide timely feedback to pupils about their work. Teachers make effective use of support plans to help pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

- Most pupils with SEND who attend the resource provision for moderate learning difficulties are attending on site. They are receiving the same support as pre-national lockdown. You are in communication with, and are supporting, the few pupils from the resource provision, and vulnerable pupils, who are not attending on site.
- Leaders have continued to provide support for those pupils with SEND who need extra help with their reading. This takes various forms, including small groups and one-to-one support. Under the leadership of the newly appointed SENCo, the reading support programme is a work in progress. Leaders are aware that the very weakest readers need support with their decoding of words through a phonics-based approach. Currently, though, staff expertise in this area is inconsistent and limited, and so the support for the weakest readers, while ambitious and well-intentioned, is less effective than it needs to be.
- At the time of the inspection, a very small number of respondents to Ofsted's questionnaires expressed concerns about leaders' handling of instances of potential bullying. We discussed these few concerns with you and other leaders, including those of the trust. Leaders have acted purposefully to make sure that the remote learning environment, whether accessed from home or on site, is a safe space for pupils to be. Leaders monitor pupils' comments in the 'chat' area of the school's chosen online teaching area and take action should pupils fall short of the expected standard of conduct. Leaders have rightly identified that they can do more to enable pupils to report any concerns should they be worried, such as about bullying, by the introduction of a reporting app, due to be launched with pupils shortly.
- Those with responsibility for governance are taking effective action to hold leaders to account for the provision of education in the current circumstances. Governors have received appropriate training from the trust to assist them in how to support and challenge leaders. Consequently, when attending 'school improvement group' meetings with leaders, they challenge leaders to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the school's curriculum during the current period of national lockdown.
- The trust is providing effective support and challenge to leaders in the provision of education in the current circumstances. Trust leaders are ensuring that school leaders are maintaining a 'business as usual' approach as much as is practicable and reasonable given the restrictions posed by COVID-19. The trust has taken sensible steps to assure itself that leaders' plans are being effective, by arranging for external partners to monitor and evaluate the impact of leaders' actions. As a result, trust leaders have a strong grasp on how best to support and challenge school leaders.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, and the multi-academy trust chief executive officer and other trust senior leaders, pupils, staff and representatives of those responsible for governance to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also met senior leaders with responsibility for: the curriculum; safeguarding arrangements; pupils' conduct both in school and when being educated from home; pupils with SEND; and leaders with responsibility for the school's programmes to help pupils with their reading. Additionally, we reviewed examples of the school's remote learning curriculum. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 40 free-text responses, and 43 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Consilium multi-academy 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

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector