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James Bird
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Bird

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Grestone Academy

Following my remote inspection with Jonathan Keay, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 4 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 require improvement.

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 has received three successive judgements of requires improvement. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in February 2020.

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 planning in foundation subjects carefully identifies the activities which will most help pupils to increase their understanding of the concepts and methods of each subject, and highlights the range of topic knowledge pupils need to learn about and remember if they are to succeed in each activity
- use information about what pupils read for pleasure in order to broaden and help them extend their reading choices
- coordinate further the support of different partners to help leaders focus on the most effective means of bringing about curriculum improvements.

Context

- You took up your post as headteacher in February 2020. A new chair of governors was appointed in November 2020. There have been changes to other key leadership positions in the last year. For example, a new early years leader and a special educational needs coordinator have been appointed.
- Approximately 8% of pupils were educated remotely in the autumn term. Pupils in Year 3 were more affected than other classes.
- Just under 10% of all pupils are registered for on-site provision, and 12% of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) attend school. Of those pupils considered vulnerable, 73% are attending on site. Two members of staff are shielding.

Main findings

- You have provided clear direction through the COVID-19 pandemic as well as addressing the ongoing challenge of improving the quality of education provided by your school. You have instigated wide-ranging and well-targeted staff training. You and your leadership team have made progress in developing the curriculum. This has resulted in better identification of what pupils should learn across the subjects of the curriculum.
- Some of your curriculum development has been hampered by the impact of COVID-19. For example, teachers need more time and support to make sure that their planning is as effective as possible. In foundation subjects, planning does not always carefully identify the activities which will most help pupils to increase their understanding of the subject they are learning. Teachers need to ensure that the curriculum in each subject builds upon what was learned by the pupils in previous years.
- In English, you carefully consider the books you want pupils to read. Pupils talk enthusiastically about the books they read at home and in school.

However, there is scope for this work to develop further so that planning maximises the time pupils spend reading high-quality texts. There is currently insufficient monitoring of the books that pupils choose when they read for pleasure. This hinders the ability of teachers to broaden and extend pupils' reading choices.

- You have invested extensively in phonics training using the support of external providers. The teaching of phonics has developed in the early years. Overall, your work has led to a firm focus on children's vocabulary development. There is a clear priority placed on supporting those children who struggle most with learning to read. As a result, children are receiving increased support so that they can catch up and keep up.
- The remote learning offer was designed with your pupils in mind and was prepared in advance. This meant it was ready to go when needed. It is a substantial offer and has been very well received by parents. Remote learning is well aligned to your school curriculum.
- You keep a close eye on the welfare of vulnerable pupils. You ensure that pupils with SEND and those who speak English as an additional language have extra support. Teachers keep in close contact with families and undertake home visits. They also produce bespoke learning resources for those pupils who need them.
- The local governing body has provided effective support through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The members have been able to offer significant challenge and support to ensure the quality of the remote education offer.
- You have received effective support from a range of other professionals since your appointment. For example, the multi-academy trust offers challenge regarding the overall standards of education through the provision of a school improvement partner. The trust supports the school through the provision of facilities, subject expertise, and information technology training to help teachers with remote learning. There is not sufficient coordination of your plans for improvement through the different arms of support. This work should have a sharper focus on the developing curriculum.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, the directors of the trust, the chair of the local governing body, pupils and staff to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also reviewed several pre-recorded remote lessons and scrutinised a range of curriculum documentation. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including four free-text responses, and 22 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing body, the directors of Hamstead Hall Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Fearn
Her Majesty's Inspector