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James Andriot
Principal
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Dear Mr Andriot

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Excelsior Academy

Following my remote inspection with Chris Pearce, 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 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 two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in March 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:

- make careful and ambitious choices about the knowledge taught to pupils as the key stage 3 curriculum is developed
- ensure that pupils who have fallen behind with their phonics and reading are given the support they need to catch up quickly.

Context

- Since the previous inspection, there have been several changes in senior leadership and governance. You were appointed as principal in June 2020. A new vice-principal arrived in September 2020. The chair of the governing body took up office in September 2020.
- In the autumn term 2020, approximately 95% of pupils experienced periods of remote education due to COVID-19.
- At the time of this inspection, around 90% of pupils were being educated at home. Just over 40% of pupils who are vulnerable and 35% of pupils with an education, health and care plan were educated on site.
- A small number of staff were absent due to COVID-19 at the time of this inspection.

Main findings

- Leaders and those responsible for governance have ensured that education has continued throughout the period when schools were only open to some pupils due to COVID-19 restrictions. Pupils' initial engagement with remote learning was low. You have provided workbooks for remote learning. However, you have faced challenges in setting up online learning because some pupils lacked computer hardware and Wi-Fi access. You have provided almost 50% of pupils at the school with a laptop. As a result of this endeavour, pupils' engagement with remote education has increased.
- You have planned carefully how to deliver education remotely. A blended approach is in place. This includes live lessons, recorded teaching and time for pupils to work independently. Teachers have developed various methods for giving pupils feedback. As a result of this, pupils receive feedback which allows them to know more and remember more.
- You have recently changed the school's curriculum. Year 9 is now a transition year between key stage 3 and key stage 4. You explained that this is to cover the national curriculum in greater breadth and depth in key stage 3. These changes now need to be embedded. You recognise that this curriculum reform is necessary to ensure that pupils develop detailed subject knowledge.

- Vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) receive extra support and help. Teaching assistants are providing support for pupils in school and for those working from home. Additional mathematics and English teaching takes place through nurture lessons. There is extra support for speech and language development and hearing impairment. Teachers adapt lesson activities to help pupils with SEND understand their work. This support is effective because you have planned it and targeted it to those who need it most.
- Leaders prioritise early reading. Phonics lessons continue to be delivered remotely. The amount of time spent teaching phonics has increased. There is a programme of staff training to develop greater expertise in phonics and early reading. However, pupils' engagement with reading and phonics lessons, when working remotely, is variable. As a result of this, some pupils will return to school with gaps in their reading and phonics knowledge.
- Governors understand the impact of the pandemic on the community and on the school. They have made strategic decisions during the pandemic, such as curriculum change and the development of remote education. Governors have continued to check and monitor the work of the school. This work has been effective.
- The academy has access to support from the trust. The trust has provided funding to purchase additional laptops. Subject leaders and teachers are benefitting from training provided through the trust. Senior leaders have a trust-wide network of support to draw on. Because of this activity, the trust is providing effective support and challenge to the school at this time.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders and teachers. We also met the multi-academy trust chief operating officer and the chair of the governing body to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We looked at some examples of remote teaching. We also reviewed evidence of how teachers check pupils' engagement and feedback to them about their remote learning. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 14 free-text responses, and 132 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of the Laidlaw multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Carl Sugden
Seconded Inspector