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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Bryan Stewart
Headteacher
Morpeth Chantry Middle School
Mitford Road
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 1RQ

Dear Mr Stewart

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Morpeth Chantry Middle School

Following my remote inspection with Alison Colenso, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 18 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.

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. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in November 2017.

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:

- develop the expertise of subject leaders in sequencing the curriculum.

Context

- Since the last full inspection, the trust has appointed a new headteacher, a new chair of the academy council and three new members. The school's senior leadership team has been restructured. A new deputy headteacher has taken up post, along with three associate assistant headteachers.
- When the school was only open to some children due to COVID-19 restrictions at the start of the spring term, three quarters of pupils were educated at home. Of those pupils who attended school each day, a quarter were identified as vulnerable. A small number of these had an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
- All pupils were attending on site at the time of this inspection.
- At the time of this inspection, a small number of staff were absent due to COVID-19. Leaders have managed this by supporting staff to teach from home where needed.

Main findings

- From January 2021, when the third national lockdown started, leaders moved teaching to an online platform. Some lessons were taught 'live' and others were pre-recorded. The usual curriculum was followed, with some adjustments.
- Work on curriculum sequencing has been a priority since your appointment. After the first national lockdown, subject leaders reviewed their schemes of learning. They worked with feeder first schools as well as the local high school to check for continuity in their curriculum plans.
- Since September 2020, an extra lesson in English and mathematics per week has been timetabled for all pupils. This has given teachers more time to revise key concepts with pupils. Leaders have also added personal, social and health education as a discrete lesson. Previously, it was taught during tutor time. The curriculum in this subject includes a focus on pupils' well-being. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, pupils have limited access to workshops for practical subjects.
- Pupils took reading and mathematics tests in March. Teachers plan to use the results to identify any gaps in knowledge. They also intend to adjust their future planning accordingly.

- In some subject plans, the key concepts that pupils must master are clear. For example, in mathematics it is stated that Year 8 pupils should understand negative numbers, ratio and algebra before they go to high school. In Year 7 science, leaders have identified cells as a key concept. When pupils have mastered this concept, they can use their knowledge to understand other subject content, for instance digestion. However, not all subject plans are as clear in their sequencing. An important priority for the school is to develop all subject leaders' expertise in planning a well-sequenced curriculum.
- Leaders have created a culture of reading for pleasure. They have trained all staff to teach reading. They believe that this is everyone's responsibility. Leaders plan to prioritise more work on strengthening pupils' vocabulary in the summer term. This is already happening in some subject areas, but it is not consistent.
- All pupils have an extra class reading lesson for one hour per week. They also have time in the library to choose age-appropriate books. In English, the curriculum has been reviewed so that there is greater challenge in the texts being taught. Older pupils now study Shakespeare plays in full. Support for weaker readers continued over the third national lockdown. Pupils attended school for face-to-face phonics sessions. Pupils can access phonics resources remotely. A six-week online programme is in place to provide extra help for weaker readers in Year 6. This is helping to develop these pupils' reading. You anticipate that larger numbers of pupils will need support with reading over time. More teachers and teaching assistants have had phonics training this year to increase capacity.
- During the third national lockdown, larger numbers of vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) attended school. This included pupils with an EHC plan. Those learning at home had the support of teaching assistants in online 'break-out' rooms. In January 2021, teachers had remote training on supporting pupils with SEND. It is too soon to measure the impact of this.
- Governors and trustees hold leaders to account. They believe that the pandemic is not a reason for leaders to lose focus on their priorities. The academy council is committed to equality of opportunity for all. The council ensured that all pupils had devices and internet access for remote learning from January. Governors have met with groups of pupils to get their views on the school's remote learning provision. The findings of these meetings have been shared with senior leaders.
- Leaders have worked with other schools to develop their curriculum. They have had support and challenge from a school improvement partner since 2018. She has worked with middle leaders on the curriculum. The school improvement partner has also worked on early reading and developing a culture of reading across the school. This work is having an impact.

Evidence

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

We also looked at the school self-evaluation document and school development plan. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 88 free-text responses, and 44 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chair of the academy council and the chief executive officer of the Three Rivers multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Strong
Her Majesty's Inspector