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Richard Gartland
Springfield Academy
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Dear Mr Gartland

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Springfield Academy

Following my visit to your school on 5 May 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring inspection 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 improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the 2020-21 COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that plans for a new phonics programme are effectively implemented
- check how well new curriculum plans are helping pupils to build knowledge and skills in their subjects.

Context

Leaders and teachers have continued to develop the wider curriculum. Some of the planned actions to check the impact of the wider curriculum have been interrupted by COVID-19.

There have been no significant staffing changes since the previous inspection.

Main findings

You and your team have maintained a focus on school improvement. You are purposefully addressing the areas for improvement raised at the previous inspection. Your staff are continuing to improve the curriculum. Your team has done this while providing heightened support for children and families over the course of the pandemic. You and your team have made pupils' safety and well-being a priority.

Since the previous inspection, you have built stronger relationships with parents and your community. You have appointed a home-school mentor. She works with pupils and families to address any barriers to coming to school. The effect of this work is reflected in improving levels of attendance. Over the period when school was only open to some pupils, you kept in touch with pupils by delivering books, resources and rewards. Parents greatly value the support of staff. All of the parents who responded to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire would recommend the school to others. The pupils who I talked to were highly appreciative of the care and support of your staff.

You have made the development of reading a key priority. You described this as 'front and centre' of your work. Leaders have purchased new books that match the sounds that pupils learn. There is evidence that ambitious new class novels are capturing pupils' interest and imagination. Your staff are developing stronger links with parents to further encourage pupils to read at home.

Your team ensures that children in the early years learn to read from their first days at school. The team is currently paying close attention to children who may have fallen behind. Your phonics leader is working with experts at a local English hub to enhance phonics teaching. Your team is considering which programme will best meet the needs of your children. This is an important decision. Leaders have plans to make the effective implementation of this new programme a key priority in the months ahead.

In mathematics, staff have also worked with experts from a local mathematics hub to develop the curriculum. They have developed resources and brought in commercial schemes. These approaches are building the expertise of teachers. Your teachers are helping pupils to develop a more secure understanding of number.

Pupils are using this knowledge to carry out more challenging mathematical procedures. This is strengthening the mathematics curriculum, with work continuing to increase the depth of the curriculum.

You have worked with your team to develop plans across the wider curriculum. You have encouraged staff to visit subject experts in other schools to improve their knowledge. Middle leaders are more responsible for leading the curriculum in their subjects. They have developed plans and resources that support greater curriculum progression. In science books, there is evidence that pupils are embracing wider curriculum content. In art, curriculum plans show how pupils' drawing and print-making will develop. Your teachers are also developing teaching strategies to help pupils remember more over time. Due to COVID-19, leaders and governors have had less opportunity to check the effect of these new plans. As time progresses, you aim to develop a clearer picture of how well the wider curriculum is implemented and how this is reflected in pupils' understanding.

Your staff value the increased purpose and direction you have brought. In their responses to the staff questionnaire, they valued leaders' consideration of their well-being. They believe the school is improving and expressed a strong sense of collective purpose.

You meet the chief executive officer (CEO) on a regular basis to review your actions to secure improvement. Governors and trustees receive regular reports from you and the CEO to check the improvement journey. Their actions to check the school's work on a first-hand basis have been affected by COVID-19. Nevertheless, governors show a good understanding of the effectiveness of remote education and of your actions to enhance safeguarding.

The trust has responded to your requests for additional staffing and resources. They supported the appointment of a home-school mentor. They also supported the purchase of new reading books. These initiatives have strengthened community links and enhanced pupils' reading. You have identified that further support for the new phonics programme will be important when your team has decided on the best programme to follow.

Additional support

Your staff have worked with a national leader for education to develop the curriculum and to improve middle leadership. Teachers have developed their subject knowledge through links with local English and mathematics hubs. Your teachers have developed stronger subject expertise in the wider curriculum through links with local primary and secondary schools.

You have invited local leaders to evaluate aspects of the school's work, which has included a successful audit of safeguarding practices. You have used local school partnerships to check curriculum coverage and the quality of pupils' work.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and your deputy headteacher. I also met your lead practitioner and a number of subject leaders. We discussed the actions taken to improve the school since the last inspection. I undertook lesson visits in English and mathematics. I also discussed attendance and aspects of safeguarding. I met two groups of pupils to discuss behaviour and any changes they had identified since the last inspection. I held a remote discussion with the CEO of the trust. I also held remote discussions with three governors and two trustees. I looked at curriculum development plans and at some examples of work in pupils' books.

I considered 22 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 40 responses to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO of the Education Village Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley

Her Majesty's Inspector