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Nichola Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Smith

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Helen's Primary Academy

Following my visit to your school on 11 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 four successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with you 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:

- support subject leaders in having secure subject knowledge and in knowing how to check on the effectiveness of the curriculum in their subject.
- ensure that the curriculum, particularly in foundation subjects, is clearly planned and sequenced so that pupils build on their knowledge in these subjects over time.

Context

Senior leaders have worked hard to continue the school's improvement journey during the pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted the rate of improvement in the school. Plans for monitoring the effectiveness of the curriculum have been hampered. Senior leaders have found it difficult to improve the delivery of the curriculum as much as they would like. Staff with expertise have not been able to model good practice and support others in the physical classroom. Leaders report difficulties in supporting newly qualified teachers in a remote learning environment.

School leaders have found that the pandemic has impeded their efforts to recruit new senior leaders to strengthen the leadership team.

Main findings

The behaviour of pupils around the school has improved dramatically since the last inspection. Pupils say that behaviour 'used to be horrendous', but they tell me how good it is now. Year 6 pupils said that improvements in behaviour have made the school a much nicer place to be in. Pupils are happy. They are lively and inquisitive, and adults have harnessed that energy positively. Pupils know exactly what is expected of them. They have a secure understanding of the new behaviour policy because it is consistently implemented by staff across the school. A nurture room called 'Gems' has been used well to support pupils who may, for a short time, need additional help to manage being in a bigger classroom environment.

Senior leaders have improved the attendance of pupils across the school. Prior to the pandemic, pupils' attendance was consistently below the national average. Since the school has been fully open to all pupils again, it has been much better.

During the pandemic, senior leaders and teachers have worked hard to build good relationships with parents and carers. They have ensured that all pupils have access to appropriate equipment if remote learning is required. They ensured that those pupils and parents who needed extra support during the pandemic received it. This has led to a positive change in relationships between parents and school staff. The parents I spoke to told me how well their pupils have been, and are being, supported and what a positive difference this has made to their lives.

Twenty staff responded to the confidential Ofsted questionnaire for staff. Responses were positive. Staff morale is high, because staff appreciate the support they receive from senior leaders in school and the trust.

Many middle leaders are new to post and/or lack the specific subject knowledge they need to lead their areas well. Curriculum intentions are not consistently clear. Senior leaders have plans to improve the skills of middle leaders, which include the recruitment of another senior leader and further training and development. Some of this work has already started. Senior leaders have a full revision of the curriculum underway.

Pupils learn to read through a sequenced programme which has been developed by the trust. Pupils know the sounds that are in the books that they read to adults. Much time in school is devoted to pupils learning to read. Most teachers teach phonics well. When I listened to pupils read, their confidence and pride in their achievements was obvious. Very occasionally, some adults give pupils too many prompts that do not help develop pupils' phonics knowledge.

Additional support

Governors and trust leaders know the school's strengths and weaknesses well. They acknowledge that, at the moment, the school needs ongoing support. The school leaders have used their assistance well to build and enhance leadership roles. For example, subject leaders within the trust have part-time posts within the school to support and develop the curriculum in English, phonics and mathematics. Governors, trust leaders and senior leaders have plans in place to develop the capacity of leadership across the school. They have a clear strategy for when and how to start reducing this support.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the chair of the local governing body and members of the multi-academy trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with members of the middle leadership team. I listened to pupils read to school staff. I spent some time speaking to pupils in the playground and in classrooms. With senior staff, I visited a number of classrooms, including Gems. I studied the record of recruitment checks and curriculum, behaviour and attendance documentation.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chair of Academies Enterprise Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Barnsley. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jo Sharpe
Her Majesty's Inspector