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James Bird
Head of School
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Dear Mr Bird

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grestone Academy

Following my visit to your school on 13 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 three 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:

- update its written policies and procedures so that everyone is clear about the schools' current and revised practices and expectations.

Context

Since the last section 5 inspection in February 2020, there have been several changes to governance, leadership and staffing. Leaders from the multi-academy trust (MAT) initially appointed you as interim head of school after the inspection in February 2020. In February 2021, you were appointed to the substantive post. Since taking up the interim position, you have appointed a new foundation stage leader and five new teachers. A new chair of the governing body was appointed by the MAT in November 2021.

Main findings

During periods of national lockdown, and despite the impact of COVID-19, the pace of school improvement has not slowed. You have used this time to develop the school curriculum and to ensure that all staff have accessed the training needed to implement the new school curriculum. Throughout these periods of lockdown, you have also provided a comprehensive package of remote learning for the pupils.

As soon as you were appointed, you began to provide much-needed stability to the school. Historically, changes in governance and leadership have slowed the pace of improvement, but you, along with a strong leadership team, have provided the clear direction and ambition needed.

Leaders and governors now have a clearer understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the school. Your detailed development plan accurately addresses the areas for improvement from the last inspection, and the new areas that you have identified as part of your evaluations of the quality of education. Governing body meetings rightly focus on the implementation of this plan. Recently, governors have implemented new systems for monitoring the impact of these actions.

In prioritising phonics teaching, you have made the conscious decision to develop your own approach rather than using a commercially available package. In doing this, you have engaged with a range of external consultants and the local literacy hub to support this development. Across the school, there are positive examples of phonics teaching. However, there are also some weaknesses in staff's knowledge of this new approach and of how to implement your system. Although you have provided staff with a great deal of training, not all have yet understood the principles of the approach. Moreover, these principles are not clearly documented anywhere, for example in a policy or similar. This risks the implementation of your programme therefore remaining inconsistent.

You have redesigned your mathematics curriculum to help pupils to understand key concepts and make connections more easily. This is beginning to have a positive effect on pupils' learning. You and your team have used a commercially published scheme as a starting point, but have refined and adapted materials so pupils' needs are best met. This clear structure supported the school well when pupils' learning

suffered during the three periods of national lockdown. Leaders, working closely with teachers, were able to assess what gaps had appeared in pupils' knowledge. They adapted the existing curriculum to prioritise what pupils needed to know to catch up quickly so they were ready for the next steps in learning. Leaders know that further work is required to implement the mathematics curriculum so all pupils learn and remember more.

Many subject leaders are new to their roles and are enhancing their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their subject. They have established a long-term plan of the outcomes that should be expected in every year group in all subjects. Subject leaders are carefully considering the knowledge and content that pupils should learn. Some subjects, such as personal, social and health education, science and history, are at an advanced stage of development now being taught in classrooms across the school. Leaders anticipate that the curriculum will have been revised fully by September 2021. To support this, a regular programme of staff subject training is already in place.

Leaders have remedied many of the weaknesses of the nursery provision effectively. Resources are now colourful, engaging and promote learning opportunities in line with the early years foundation stage curriculum. Children in nursery are settled, happy and eager to play and learn with other children and staff. The nursery is a positive learning environment. Leaders know that much more work is needed to improve the quality of learning. For example, in nursery, activities still do not consistently link directly to what children have previously learned and understood.

During the visit, I also looked at aspects of safeguarding and behaviour. It is clear that you have implemented systems to make both even stronger. However, these developments and current provision are not always reflected in your written school policies and procedures. For example, during the inspection you talked about the principles and procedures for developing effective learning behaviours. While there is impact of your vision evident in the classrooms visited, your written school policy does not articulate how these principles and procedures should be consistently implemented.

Additional support

The MAT has provided effective support for leaders to develop the quality of education. The MAT provides finance, human resources and premises management support so that school leaders can concentrate on developing the quality of education. In partnership with the head of school, they have brokered additional support for leaders, such as engaging a school improvement partner to further challenge the school. When needed, the MAT has made difficult decisions to ensure that leadership and governance is rapidly improving, for example appointing key governors to the local governing body to further enhance the skills and knowledge of the group.

The school has also brokered their support from various consultants to help with such things as their phonics programme and its implementation. This support, along with a partnership with a local, highly successful primary school, is helping to maintain the pace of improvement at the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the head of school, other senior leaders, executive principals, pupils, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance and the school improvement partner to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also visited lessons and reviewed the quality of work in pupils' books. I evaluated survey responses from staff and parents. School leaders' reports to governors and the minutes and monitoring reports of the local governing body were also included as part of the evidence base.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing body, the executive principals of the Hamstead Hall multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Pollitt
Her Majesty's Inspector