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Elaine Thornhill
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Dear Mrs Thornhill

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Firbeck Academy

Following my visit to your school on 9 June 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 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:

- continue to strengthen the school's curriculum so that it makes clear, in all subjects and year groups, what pupils are expected to know and remember.

Context

Since the last full inspection conducted in July 2019, a new executive headteacher and headteacher have been appointed. Since the additional monitoring visit conducted in February 2021, an acting headteacher and an acting deputy headteacher have been appointed. A temporary, part-time special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) has also been appointed.

Main findings

Leaders have been quick to begin to address the curriculum weaknesses identified during the most recent section 8 inspection. They have worked with subject leaders to plan what pupils will learn by the end of each term across key stages 1 and 2. In computing and science, curriculum plans make clear the most important things that pupils should know and remember. However, some subject plans still lack this level of detail.

The early years curriculum sets out, in broad terms, what pupils will learn and when. The intention is to prepare pupils for the range of subjects they will go on to study in key stage 1. However, plans mostly show what pupils will do. They do not make it clear precisely what pupils should know and remember. The early years curriculum is being refined this term to address this issue.

Leaders have started to check on how well pupils are learning in some subjects. These checks are working well in subjects that are comprehensively planned. Nevertheless, checks are not in place for all subjects at this moment in time.

Teaching pupils to read is a high priority. Teachers read to pupils daily. The books that teachers read are carefully chosen to support pupils' learning across the curriculum. Plans show what pupils will learn in reading and when. Pupils enjoy reading and they read regularly. Leaders have purchased more books for pupils to read, but some older pupils would like access to a wider variety of literature and even more challenging books.

All staff have been trained in the school's approach to teaching phonics. Leaders have made sure that phonics is taught with a greater consistency. Teachers follow a similar approach. They teach the sounds that pupils need to know in the same way. However, pupils are not always given enough opportunity to practise the sounds they are learning in lessons.

Senior leaders have worked with subject leaders to review and refine their curriculum plans. Some teachers have benefited from working with other teachers from schools across the trust. This has supported them in improving their planning and teaching. Teachers are positive about the support that senior leaders are providing. They say that leaders take into account their workload and well-being.

Pupils' behaviour has improved. Leaders have put additional support in place for pupils who need help to follow the school's rules. The school's family liaison officer provides further help for pupils and their families if needed. Pupils say that behaviour is good in school and that teachers tackle poor behaviour. They say that they enjoy school but, due to COVID-19 restrictions, they miss socialising with other pupils from other classes.

The new SENDCo is getting to grips with supporting teachers in their planning. There is a more consistent approach to identifying the specific support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). This is helping teachers to meet the needs of pupils with SEND more closely. Pupils are now getting better support and the help that they need. Pupils in the hearing impairment unit receive help that is well matched to their needs. Staff in the unit are skilled at helping pupils develop their communication skills.

The governing body remains ambitious. It has a long-term view of how it wants the school to improve. This includes improving the school's reputation and standing in the local community.

Additional support

The school has continued to receive appropriate support from the multi-academy trust. The trust has carefully managed changes to the school's senior leadership team. As a result, the school continues to demonstrate capacity to improve. The trust has an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The trust is working closely with the governing body and leaders to implement agreed actions to improve the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the acting headteacher, the acting deputy headteacher, safeguarding leaders, a representative of the trust and three governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I also met with the early years leader, the SENDCo, the leader of the focused provision for deaf children, a group of staff and a group of pupils. I visited lessons and listened to pupils read to adults in school. I looked at documentation in relation to safeguarding as well as the school's plans for improvement. I considered the four responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including four free-text responses, and 17 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the Nova Education Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Nottingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Vic Wilkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector