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Mark Kingswood
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Kingswood

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Fernhill School

Following my visit to your school on 23 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 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:

- ensure that all subject areas provide the same consistently rich curriculum coverage as the best in the school
- deepen governors' knowledge of the curriculum in order to enable precise and effective challenge to senior leaders and all subject areas.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection in September 2018, you have restructured leadership at subject level, appointed specialist teaching staff, reduced the number of agency staff covering subjects and reorganised pastoral care of pupils. Since the first monitoring inspection in January 2020, 11 members of teaching and support staff have left the school. A new committee structure, with a focus on the curriculum, is now in place within the governing body.

Main findings

You and your leadership team have resolutely kept the momentum of school improvement going throughout the challenges of the pandemic. All leaders are determined to do the right things for pupils, especially nurturing pupils' welfare, providing a rich curriculum and assuring memorable extra-curricular experiences. The whole school team is working with energy and a cheerful outlook, all of which is testimony to your clear direction.

Senior leaders have wisely concentrated on building up the skills, knowledge and accountability of your middle leaders. Subject and pastoral leaders have made a vital contribution to curriculum improvements and pupils' well-being over the last 12 months. They relish the opportunity to develop a more demanding curriculum for all pupils, particularly in key stage 3. Pupils told me that they feel much more confident in their teachers and enjoy learning from subject specialists. You rightly identify that pupils' experience in each subject needs to be consistently high, with no weak links.

Parents and pupils very much appreciated the efforts the school made to keep pupils on track with their learning when they had to learn at home. However, leaders and teachers have identified that pupils need to go back over some content. Pupils are beginning to gain more confidence when recalling, repeating and developing answers to their teachers' close questioning. To deepen and broaden pupils' wider reading, the English department changed its approach to class texts. During the inspection, pupils talked about what they had read during their time learning at home and were able to link it closely with what they are reading now.

Better provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is a long-term priority. SEND training for all staff has been well received and is being acted on. It is heartening to see pupils with SEND being tested by searching questions and answering confidently. Resources designed to unlock difficult lesson content help pupils to participate actively alongside their peers. In addition, pupils who need to catch up with reading and mathematics are attending well-designed and relevant extra tuition. At the time of this inspection, Year 11 pupils had already left the school and were following induction and support programmes as part of their continuing education post-16.

Governors' knowledge and skills have increased since the section 5 inspection in

2018. They are keen to build up closer links with all subject areas to help them to understand the curriculum. Governors shrewdly acknowledge that as the school improves, they will need to ask more precise and challenging questions about the curriculum and leaders' decisions.

Additional support

Leaders and staff in the school have made the most of the support and guidance provided by the local authority. Teachers and learning support assistants have especially welcomed training in how to support pupils with SEND. In addition, subjects including English, science, mathematics and technology have greatly benefited from collaborative work with the local authority and colleagues in other schools.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, members of the senior leadership team, subject leaders and governors in order to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I held meetings with a group of teachers and a selection of pupils from Years 8 and 10. I visited a number of lessons, accompanied by subject and senior leaders. I also spoke to a representative from the local authority. I reviewed plans to improve the school, alongside your self-evaluation and records of staff training. I considered responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 60 free-text comments. I also considered 35 completed staff surveys.

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector