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Clive Jones
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Dear Mr Jones

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Smestow School

Following my visit to your school on 13 July 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 began. 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:

- improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils by promoting wider reading and supporting pupils to develop their language skills to cope better with the language demands of each subject

- encourage pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, to take part in enrichment activities that will support their personal development.

Context

The school provided remote learning for pupils during the pandemic. At the time of this inspection, half of the pupils in Years 7 and 8 were isolating due to a confirmed case of COVID-19. These pupils were accessing learning remotely. The pandemic has delayed some of the school's plans for improvement. However, leaders have maintained a focus on improving the school's curriculum, staff development and pupils' well-being.

Since the previous section 5 inspection, the school has had three different headteachers. The executive headteacher of the trust is now the substantive headteacher of the school. Two assistant headteachers have been appointed. The special educational needs and/or disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) took up the role in the autumn term 2020. Following the previous inspection, the school experienced a high turnover of teaching staff. Staffing is now more stable.

Following the previous section 5 inspection, trust leaders replaced the academy's governing board with an interim academy board (IAB).

Main findings

You took over the day-to-day running of the academy in your capacity as executive headteacher of the trust in September 2020. Since then, you have built trust and confidence in the staff and pupils. There is now a sharper focus on improving pupils' achievement through improving the curriculum. Staff at all levels feel well supported in their roles. They share your vision. They say that 'Smestow is like a family'. Staff are excited about what the future holds.

Teachers have revised the curriculum to ensure it addresses pupils' needs more effectively. The school has moved to a three-year key stage 3 where pupils study a broad range of subjects for longer. Teachers now have a much clearer understanding of what to teach, when to teach it and why. Staff plan learning in faculties. They share ideas and resources. Curriculum plans across different subjects are now more closely aligned. In English, for example, pupils study books that are relevant to the period of history they are learning about. Learning is more precisely matched to pupils' starting points.

Teachers value the simplicity of the revised teaching and learning policy. This helps them build challenge, support and assessment into every lesson. Leaders provide teachers with clear guidance on where to access support if they need it. Pupils say that lessons are now more interesting, and staff are now more enthusiastic about the subjects they teach.

When pupils returned to school following the pandemic, they had gaps in their knowledge and skills. Subject leaders adapted the curriculum, particularly for Year 7 pupils, to help pupils catch up. This helped pupils to settle into secondary school, while ensuring that they accessed the full curriculum.

At the time of the last remote monitoring visit, you explained that music was not included on the timetable. However, you have appointed a music teacher for September who will teach music throughout key stage 3. Pupils will have the chance to study music GCSE in the future.

Reading has a higher priority in the school, although you plan to raise the profile of reading further. The trust has made a considerable investment in a new library. Some pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, find the reading demands in some subjects too difficult. You have plans to support pupils with the reading demands in each subject, but these are at an early stage of development.

The quality of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is improving. The SENDCo supports teachers to assess pupils' needs and adapt the curriculum appropriately. She measures the impact of interventions. Leaders work closely with external experts to get the right help for pupils. Staff assess academic progress, taking into account attendance and behaviour reports. This helps leaders to identify barriers to pupils' learning and put in place appropriate support. As a result, outcomes for pupils with SEND are improving.

Disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress. They are achieving better exam results, particularly in the sixth form. Last year, almost all Year 11 and Year 13 pupils moved on to college, university, employment or training. You encourage disadvantaged pupils to opt for EBACC GCSE subjects. You provide support for disadvantaged pupils to attend the sixth form and off-site visits.

Leaders do not currently check whether disadvantaged pupils are attending enrichment activities. However, you have plans to do this from September through a new programme of activities called 'Building People'. This programme is designed to support pupils' personal development. This programme has not yet started.

The school's development plan identifies the correct priorities and includes appropriate timescales. Leaders and the IAB check progress against the actions in the plans regularly.

You have prioritised appointing staff with the relevant expertise to ensure the school will improve. Staffing is now more stable. Your determined focus on staff development has paid off. Staff value your commitment to their professional development. They feel well supported and have confidence in the expertise of the leadership team. Teachers enjoy the opportunity to engage in professional discussions about teaching and learning which now happen across the school. They

say that you are approachable and open to challenge. They feel empowered to try new approaches.

Additional support

Members of the IAB provide valuable expertise. They support and challenge you and other leaders about the decisions you are making. For example, following the recent proposal to move away from setting pupils by ability in key stage 3, IAB members challenged you to justify this decision and scrutinised research for evidence of the effectiveness of this approach.

The school has received support from a local teaching school, supported by funding from the Department for Education. Leaders have used this support to develop teachers' skills in assessing pupils' progress.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you throughout the day. I also met with two deputy headteachers, two assistant headteachers, the multi-academy trust chief executive officer, pupils, staff and the chair of the IAB to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I met with two faculty leaders and a small group of teaching staff. I met with the SENDCo and key stage 4 achievement leader.

I visited lessons and looked at pupils' books. I looked at records of monitoring activities and IAB minutes.

Before the inspection, I talked to you about curriculum development and reviewed documents on the school's website. I read the academy development plan.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the IAB, the chief executive officer of the University of Wolverhampton multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Wolverhampton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jane Spilsbury
Her Majesty's Inspector