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James Andriot
Principal
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Dear Mr Andriot

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Excelsior Academy

Following my visit to your school on 2 December 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 judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. I discussed the ongoing 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:

- build on recent improvements in the teaching of phonics by ensuring pupils read books that match the sounds they know
- refine classroom routines and improve pupils' behaviour in the early years and key stage 1 so that more pupils focus on their learning

- continue to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence, particularly for pupils in key stage 4.

Context

There have been several changes in leadership since the previous section 5 inspection in March 2020. You took up post in the summer term following the inspection and a new vice-principal was appointed in September 2020. The chair of the governing body started his new role at the same time.

You have restructured the pastoral leadership team. Following this, a new assistant principal was appointed with responsibility for pupils in Years 10 and 11.

The 'school within a school' model has ceased. Currently, pupils of all ages belong to the same Excelsior family.

You and other leaders report that COVID-19 has curbed several initiatives and actions to improve the school. However, it has not diminished leaders' hunger to explore alternative ways to improve the quality of education at the school. During the autumn term 2020, there were 100 pupils and staff infected and absent with COVID-19. Leaders' analysis of attendance data highlights that approximately 14,000 days of learning were lost.

Main findings

At the last inspection, inspectors noted that 'under-developed reading was the single biggest barrier to pupils' achievement'. Accordingly, you were asked to focus on the teaching of early reading and the development of reading across the primary phase. During this visit, I listened to pupils read to a familiar adult, observed the teaching of phonics and discussed with leaders their actions to improve pupils' reading.

In September 2021, staff started to teach phonics with fidelity, using a validated programme that meets the Department for Education's core criteria for effective phonics teaching. Teachers and support staff have attended several training sessions to help them teach phonics well, and in a consistent way.

Pupils usually read books that help them practise the sounds that they have learned. However, occasionally, some pupils read books that are too difficult for them to read fluently and with confidence. These pupils move on to their next stage of reading before they have mastered the sounds they have covered previously.

Some pupils still find it difficult to concentrate when learning to read. When multiple phonics lessons are taught at the same time, the layout of the rooms and the organisation of pupil groups causes some pupils to lose focus. This can be particularly troublesome when teachers are helping pupils to understand new phonic sounds, such as the subtle differences when articulating the sound 'th' for words such as 'thin' or 'these'.

Leaders, including the newly appointed early years leader, have achieved a lot in a short time to help improve pupils' early reading. The new phonics programme, coupled with high-quality staff training, is making a big difference. Pupils' reading skills are improving swiftly. Pupils are passionate about reading. They look forward to the end of the day when they listen to their teachers bringing stories to life. One pupil described to me how, during story time, her teacher often 'took her places, without actually going places!'. Staff have gone to considerable lengths to create a rich learning environment that focuses heavily on reading famous authors and pupils' favourite books, including 'Letters from the Lighthouse' by Emma Carroll and 'The Explorer' by Katherine Rundell.

Leaders have continued to review and amend the curriculum. At the time of the last inspection, very few pupils studied GCSE subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate. Now, nearly two-thirds of pupils in Year 10 follow a curriculum which includes subjects such as English language and literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography or history and a language.

Despite considerable barriers due to COVID-19, leaders have managed to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence. Leaders from the school and trust have worked closely with staff to raise the profile of attendance across the school. Staff now receive weekly attendance data for the pupils in their class. This allows staff to praise and reward pupils who are attending school more than they have done previously. Additionally, staff can identify pupils who need a helping hand to improve their attendance or their punctuality to school. Staff have completed 544 home visits this term to speak with families and pupils about the importance of good attendance. You have invested in pupil rewards to recognise stronger attendance and made an additional appointment to the attendance team. While attendance is improving, you are not complacent. Persistent absence continues to be high, particularly in Year 10. Staff are working closely with pupils who continue to miss large parts of their education. To support this process, leaders have very recently introduced a new attendance reporting system, providing staff with additional information and further insight into attendance patterns and trends for the pupils in their class.

The pupils I spoke to during the visit were excellent ambassadors for the school. They described to me in detail how leaders and staff have improved pupils' behaviour even further. They say that nearly all pupils are tolerant and get along with each other. The pupils I spoke with appreciate the various lunchtime clubs and the many staff who supervise and look out for them when they are not in lessons. Leaders' own information relating to detentions, exclusions and general standards of behaviour across the school demonstrates an improving picture.

You know the school well. In a short space of time, while supporting staff, pupils and families through the pandemic, you have established effective working relationships with senior school and trust staff. Leaders understand their roles and responsibilities in detail. Governors are well-informed. They understand the school's current strengths and areas that need further improvement. Governors seek to establish facts and challenge leaders in a variety of different ways. They provide strong support for the headteacher.

Additional support

The trust has provided significant support since the last inspection. This has included school-to-school support with a high-performing school from within the trust. Leaders from both schools have helped to embed the 'Inevitable Progress' approach to improving the quality of education pupils receive. Teachers across the school and trust now follow an agreed approach to planning lessons, supporting pupils' learning and assessment. The opportunities for staff to share resources, ideas and plans between schools are much stronger. The trust has also provided additional leadership capacity to help improve rates of attendance and pupils' attitudes to learning.

You are outward facing too. Having looked further afield, you secured additional support from beyond the trust to help develop the primary curriculum, literacy and the management of behaviour across the school. You state that the latter has contributed to stronger systems and processes linked to the supervision of pupils during social times. More recently, the curriculum leaders of mathematics, English and science have worked closely with an experienced external consultant, attending face-to-face coaching sessions each month to help improve the quality of education pupils receive.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you. I also met with curriculum and senior leaders, the chief executive officer and leaders of the Laidlaw Schools Trust, pupils, and representatives of those responsible for governance to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I visited lessons in the early years and key stage 1 and met with the leader of the early years. I listened to pupils read with staff. I also scrutinised curriculum plans, minutes from governing body meetings, school action plans and the school self-evaluation document.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Laidlaw Schools Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector