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Nicola Ashton
Principal
Kepier
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Dear Mrs Ashton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Kepier

Following my visit to your school on 3 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.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

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 curriculum plans clearly set out the important knowledge that leaders want pupils to know and remember.

Context

A new chair of the trust, who also chairs the academy governing board, took up post in September 2019. There have been significant changes in leadership, including a new assistant principal and four new vice principals. Despite the challenges of providing

education during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have remained firmly focused on improving the school. You have taken the decision to move away from pupils being taught in 'sets'. Instead, except for mathematics where some sets remain, pupils are now taught in mixed-attainment classes.

The football academy continues to support those pupils with an aptitude for football. Pupils follow a bespoke curriculum with significant opportunities for learning about football, while being fully involved in the school.

Main findings

You and other leaders are taking the necessary actions to improve the school. Your leadership team is united, with a clear sense of direction. You are keenly focused on ensuring that all pupils achieve well. You have made significant improvements to all of the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. As a result, this is a rapidly improving school.

There is a broad and ambitious curriculum in place. You have ensured that subject leaders have the skills, knowledge and confidence to develop clear curriculum plans that carefully set out the 'powerful knowledge' that they want pupils to know and remember. Improvements in the quality of education are stronger in some subjects than others. Some subject leaders have started to consider the 'disciplinary knowledge' that pupils need. For example, in history, the knowledge that pupils need to be able to 'think like a historian' has been clearly identified. However, this strand of knowledge has not been threaded through the curriculum plans alongside the rich subject knowledge. In other subjects, the identification of 'disciplinary knowledge' is less clear.

Staff value the weekly professional development programme. They say it helps them to further develop strategies to support all pupils to make progress. Teachers have strong subject knowledge. They regularly share best practice within their subject areas. Pupils say that teachers help them in lessons. Pupils spoken to were able to recall the 'powerful knowledge' they had been taught in science lessons. There is a clear focus on supporting those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The senior leader overseeing this area has brought about sustained change and improvements. Teaching staff have contributed towards support plans and targets to meet the needs of pupils with SEND.

You are clear about the importance of reading and are keen to instil a love of reading in all pupils. Some pupils are at the earliest stages of learning to read. They have not yet learned their letters and the corresponding sounds. Staff who teach English have received phonics training to help support struggling readers to catch up quickly. A programme of support for these pupils is planned for the spring term.

Pupils' behaviour has improved since the previous inspection. A new behaviour system is in place. Parents are automatically informed through an app when their child has misbehaved. For some pupils, this system has helped them to improve their behaviour.

You are aware of the challenges within the local community and some of the wider issues that some pupils face. You and other leaders have acted strategically to ensure that pupils have the information they need to help keep themselves safe. This is evident in assemblies and a pastoral programme that addresses current and local issues.

Pastoral leaders celebrate both the academic and personal gains that pupils make. Pupils value the 'praise' comments that they receive. There are a range of opportunities for pupils. These include extra-curricular clubs such as philosophy and ethics, cooking and art, as well as various sporting activities. Some pupils have been elected by their peers to be 'lead learners'. These pupils form groups with a specific focus, such as anti-bullying and the well-being of students and staff. Pupils value the opportunity to work with school leaders to make a difference in their school. You are rightly proud that the work of the pupil-led eco-sustainability club, helped with the accreditation of your school as an 'eco-school' and being awarded 'Green Flag' status.

Teachers say that leaders have their well-being at heart. They appreciate how you have worked to understand their workload, particularly given the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff welcome the changes made to the marking and feedback policy. Teachers at the earliest stages of their career appreciate the support that they receive. They say that there is a supportive working environment.

Governors provide strong support and challenge. The chair of governors has expertise in educational leadership. Governors challenge school leaders effectively to assure themselves that the decisions being taken are well considered and in the best interests of the pupils. Despite the current challenges associated with the pandemic, governors continue to take an active role in ensuring that improvements are both rapid and sustained. Link governors, with responsibility for different subjects and areas of the school, look forward to when they can resume their routine visits on site.

Additional support

You have been proactive in seeking external verification and quality assurance of the work leaders have undertaken to improve the school. You value the support you have received from the local authorities. This included an external review of the pupil premium funding as well as support for some subject areas such as in English, physical education, history, French and geography. Subject leaders benefit from subject network meetings and subject associations. They value the opportunities to share resources and best practice.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders, curriculum leaders for English, mathematics and history and a group of pupils. I met the chair of the trust and two members of the governing board to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with a group of staff, both teaching and support staff. I spoke with teachers who were at the early stages of their teaching career.

I visited lessons with the vice principal as part of a 'learning walk'. I reviewed curriculum plans for science and business studies. I looked at pupils' workbooks in English, mathematics and history. I reviewed the minutes of the governing board meetings and looked at a range of documentation regarding school improvement that leaders shared with me. I reviewed the responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and spoke by telephone with a parent.

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

Yours sincerely

Eleanor Belfield
Her Majesty's Inspector