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Paul Willerton
Principal
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Dear Mr Willerton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Sutton Academy

Following my visit to your school on 1 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 that 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 four successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection that 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.

Leaders should take further action to:

- develop their assessment strategies, so that all teachers have the tools to check whether pupils have learned the intended knowledge in the curriculum, particularly in key stage 3.

Context

Since the previous section 5 inspection, there have been considerable changes to the leadership team. You took up post as principal in September 2020, after previously being the senior vice-principal at the school. You have since made an internal appointment to the post of vice-principal. You have also recruited three assistant principals. Two were external appointments and one further assistant principal was recruited internally. Added to this, the faculty leader for humanities and the second in department for science have been seconded to the senior leadership team as associate assistant principals. In addition, there are new faculty leaders for mathematics and English, and a new subject leader for art and design.

Within the wider staff structure, five new teachers and five new members of support staff have joined the school. A new chair of the board of trustees has taken up post, and a new trustee has joined the board of trustees.

Main findings

You, your vice-principal, the trustees and other senior leaders have wasted no time in improving the quality of education for pupils at The Sutton Academy. Following the previous inspection report, you ceased the practice of removing some pupils in Year 11 from the school's roll, as this was not in their best interests. You have also overhauled the structure of the curriculum. You and your leadership team have been adept at identifying the priorities required to move the school forward, and your well-thought-out improvement plans reflect this. You relish the challenge and support that you receive from external advisers and the local authority. The bold and decisive actions that you have taken, coupled with the speed at which you have implemented positive changes, mean that you are rapidly moving towards becoming a good school.

You benefit from the support of trustees. Trustees acted swiftly to challenge you to address the deficits in the curriculum. In collaboration with you and senior leaders, they recognised that the previous curriculum was not suitably broad or ambitious for all pupils. This was because the predecessor curriculum, particularly at key stage 3, did not cover all the topics that pupils should learn. Pupils are now deepening their knowledge of many subjects in key stage 3.

You equally recognised that, in addition to weaknesses in the curriculum at key stage 3, there were also weaknesses in subject leadership. You and the trustees have acted judiciously to strengthen the quality of leadership at both senior- and middle-leader level, by making new appointments to key posts. With the support of external advisers, you have also ensured that subject leaders receive ongoing, high-quality training which is successfully developing their curriculum expertise.

You have introduced rigorous quality assurance processes, so that subject leaders can be held to account for the quality of education in their areas. As a result, your subject leaders are now addressing the deficiencies in their subject curriculums. Most notably, you

and your leaders have secured improvements in English, geography, history, and art and design. You have plans in place to develop middle leaders' skills further during this academic year. This is to secure additional improvements to the curriculum in their subject areas.

You have also ensured that trustees are better placed to hold senior and middle leaders to account for the quality of education. For example, you have introduced link trustees for each curriculum area, so that they have more effective oversight of the curriculum. You have plans in place to implement further training. This is to ensure that all trustees gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum that is now in operation.

In addition to increasing the breadth of the key stage 3 curriculum, you are working to ensure that all pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, access the same curriculum as their peers. For example, you have taken appropriate steps to ensure that an increasing number of these pupils follow the English Baccalaureate suite of subjects. You are determined that all pupils can choose these subjects, should they so wish. You are ensuring that all of your staff have increasingly high expectations of all pupils, irrespective of pupils' backgrounds or additional needs.

To ensure that teachers' increasing expectations of what pupils can and should achieve are realised, you have allocated a substantial amount of time for subject leaders to plan their curriculums. They are currently developing their curriculum plans so that they identify the essential knowledge that pupils need to learn. Subject leaders are carefully considering how to ensure that pupils build on prior learning. Teachers said that they are finding this process invaluable. They understand the link between quality curriculum planning and pupils' achievement.

While subject leaders have already begun this work, some subjects are further on than others. You explained that curriculum planning will be completed by May 2022. You and other senior leaders are mindful of the staff's workload and well-being, particularly as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, the work that has been completed thus far is effective. In collaboration with their departments, subject leaders are producing well-planned curriculums, where new knowledge is presented in a logical order. Subject leaders and teachers understand the importance of prior knowledge in helping pupils to learn more complex ideas. Pupils, particularly those in key stage 3, are benefiting from this work.

In addition to curriculum planning, you are also improving the delivery of the curriculum. You have put into place a coaching programme so that all teachers can improve how they deliver the curriculum and how they use assessment. In many lessons, teachers' approaches to delivering the curriculum reflect your high expectations. For example, you have invested in training teachers in strategies to model new learning. Teachers use these strategies with increasing confidence. Pupils said that this is helping them to understand and learn more.

Teachers now routinely choose activities to help pupils to remember their learning from previous lessons. Although this approach is helping pupils to build on their prior learning, some subject leaders and teachers are not as clear about how to check that pupils are learning effectively over time. Some subject leaders and teachers have not ensured that their assessments match the knowledge that they have defined in their curriculum plans.

You have successfully raised the profile of reading across the school through a well-thought-out, aspirational reading programme. For example, you have introduced a diverse set of challenging texts for pupils to read during 'Ready to Learn' time. Your specialist reading leaders have ensured that all staff are well trained to support pupils to develop their reading habits.

In lessons, there is a clear focus on developing pupils' vocabulary and subject-specific language. Pupils said that this is helping them to understand their work better. You have comprehensive systems in place to identify and support pupils in the early stages of learning to read. These systems are helping pupils in key stage 3 to catch up quickly with their reading. You discussed your plans to use similar strategies to help older pupils who are behind with their reading knowledge to catch up.

The pupils who I spoke with were incredibly positive about the changes that you have made. They told me that across the curriculum, they are now learning the building blocks of knowledge that they need for future success. Pupils appreciate the support that they receive from their teachers.

Additional support

You have sought effective subject-specific support from external consultants and a local multi-academy trust. This has improved subject leadership and provided subject leaders with the knowledge to develop their subject curriculums. As a stand-alone academy, you relish the opportunity to share ideas with, and be challenged by, external partners. The local authority values your engagement with its improvement services.

Trustees share your desire to continually improve the school. More recently, they have made a strategic appointment to strengthen the board of trustees, so that they can continue to challenge and support you well.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, your vice-principal, other senior leaders, middle leaders, pupils, staff, and representatives of those responsible for governance. I also spoke with representatives of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I scrutinised curriculum plans, visited a selection of lessons and looked at examples of pupils' work. I also reviewed the school's self-evaluation document, the school improvement plan and external evaluations of the school.

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 St Helens. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Goodwin
Her Majesty's Inspector