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Kevin Shepherd
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Dear Mr Shepherd

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Benet Biscop Catholic Academy

Following my visit to your school on 16 March 2022, 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 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:

The school continues to require improvement. Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action toward the school becoming a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- Ensure that pupils fully understand why the rules in the school behaviour policy are important and how they will effectively support pupils in their development.

- Develop assessment approaches that will allow curriculum leaders to evaluate the effectiveness of your new subject curriculums, and their implementation, such that any necessary adjustments can be made.
- Take steps to improve the attendance of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those eligible for pupil premium funding.

Context

Since the previous inspection, in March 2019, the school has undergone some significant changes. You assumed the role as headteacher in September 2019 and the school joined Bishop Bewick Catholic Education Trust (BBCET) in May 2020. Your senior leadership team has largely remained unchanged, although you introduced greater clarity of the roles and responsibilities of each member. Since September 2021, your leadership team has been enhanced by a senior assistant headteacher seconded from another school within BBCET.

Your ambitious timescales for improving the school were impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions to improve behaviour and attendance were well underway; however, just as work was beginning on developing your curriculum, schools were closed to all but a small number of pupils. Staff capacity was directed towards developing remote education for pupils and supporting pupils who were not engaging fully with the work set. Work on developing your curriculum restarted once pupils returned fully to school.

Main findings

When you took up post as headteacher, you quickly identified that the standard of behaviour in the school was not good enough to allow pupils to take advantage of the opportunities provided in lessons. You made improving the behaviour of pupils your number one priority.

Leaders' analysis identified that the school's previous behaviour system was overly complex leading to inconsistencies of application by staff. This limited the effectiveness of behaviour management. You have introduced a new, simplified behaviour system. Teachers have received significant training in how to apply it consistently and fairly, including scripted 'narratives' that they can use in specific situations. Pupils are positive about the changes to behaviour in school. They say that disruptive behaviour in lessons is now rare, but when it does occur teachers deal with it consistently and fairly. Despite this positive impact on behaviour, many pupils do not have a positive view of the behaviour system in school. They feel that some of the sanctions are unduly harsh. This is causing some pupils to have a negative view of the school overall.

Development of the 'reward' side of your behaviour policy is not as far advanced. Pupils and teachers report a range of rewards for positive actions including contact with home, praise postcards and a half-termly 'positive points' draw for prizes. Positive

points are awarded for pupils doing the right thing 'day in, day out' but these are not being used consistently across school. You have recently used pupil- and staff-voice to explore how to develop your reward system.

On taking up post as headteacher, you identified that the curriculum offered by the school was not appropriate for the needs of pupils. The curriculum design meant pupils were stopping their study of many subjects at the end of Year 8. This was limiting their depth of knowledge in those subjects they did not elect to study at key stage 4. Pupils were taking their English GCSE examinations in Year 10 and focusing on English Literature in Year 11. This was limiting their ability to achieve highly as they were missing out on a year of development. Leaders have transformed the curriculum. Pupils now study a wide range of subjects until the end of Year 9 and pupils study both English and English Literature until the end of Year 11. This gives them the best possible chance to achieve highly in their GCSE qualifications.

Subject curriculum development work is at a relatively early stage. Planned work, from the school and the trust, was delayed by COVID-19 as capacity was diverted to developing remote education. Curriculum plans in many subjects previously focused on the activities pupils were to be doing rather than the precise content that pupils needed to learn. Leaders have focused on developing curriculum leaders' knowledge of effective curriculum design and supporting them to develop effective curriculums for their subject areas. As a result, teachers are now clear about the key knowledge, skills and understanding that pupils need to learn within each unit of work.

Leaders have assured themselves of the quality of the planned curriculums through structured discussions at scheduled meetings with curriculum leaders, and through subject reviews undertaken jointly with subject specialists from other schools within the trust. Curriculum leaders have found these subject reviews supportive as they have helped them to reflect on, and therefore improve, aspects of the curriculums in their subjects.

Regular department meetings allow curriculum leaders and their subject teams to discuss how to most effectively teach upcoming units of work including the effective use of formative assessment to adjust teaching. Curriculum leaders' thinking about summative assessment is at a much earlier stage of development. Leaders have prioritised 'getting the curriculum right' and are now starting to think about how best to assess the effectiveness of their curriculum design and its implementation.

Despite the challenge of the pandemic, leaders have continued to focus on improving attendance. Leaders identified that some processes previously used, such as automated texts and letters, were impersonal and lacking effectiveness. To address this, leaders have recruited an additional attendance officer. This has allowed a greater 'human' element to be involved in the processes, including phone calls home on the first day of absence and increased use of home visits. These stronger relationships between school staff and families are leading to stronger collaborative work with families of pupils with previously poor attendance. Whilst this is having a positive

impact overall, leaders are aware that attendance of pupils with SEND, and those pupils eligible for pupil premium funding, is not improving as quickly. Leaders with responsibility for attendance have made this area a priority.

Leaders commissioned an external review of SEND provision. They have acted on the recommendations. Previously, support plans for pupils with SEND were not fit for purpose. Many were too long, and too generic, to be of use to teachers in meeting the needs of individual pupils. Plans have been rewritten with pupil and family involvement and are now briefer and closely tailored to the needs of individual pupils. Plans are more useful to teachers when working with the named young people. This is increasing their effectiveness.

Recent training for staff on supporting pupils with SEND included video testimonies from your pupils and their families about their experiences in school. This had a powerful effect on staff. Pupils with SEND are now part of the daily dialogue in school. The progress of pupils with SEND is no longer seen as primarily the responsibility of the special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) and her team. Department meetings now always begin with a focus on pupils with SEND, where a learning support assistant (LSA) works with the department to develop scaffolding and support for an upcoming unit of work. This collaborative process is effective professional development in that it models how to adjust teaching and resources so that those with additional needs can still access the full curriculum. Leaders have identified that support for the younger pupils with SEND is not as effective as it is for older pupils. This is an area for ongoing development.

The trust has designated the school as a 'supported school'. Within the trust structure, this reduces the delegated responsibilities of the governing committee. Governing committee meetings are structured around key strategic focus so that governors can explore key issues in depth. Where they have not been able, for reasons of national restrictions, to undertake visits to the school, governors have found alternative ways of gathering additional information including online meetings with key staff and a range of staff and pupil surveys. As a result, governors have a secure understanding of the strengths and areas in need of further development of the school. They are able to provide appropriate challenge and support to leaders.

Trust leaders have a secure knowledge of the school through reports from regular visits from their nominated BBCET link adviser. These visits, each of which is focused on a particular aspect of the school's work, provide appropriate levels of challenge and support for leaders in school. Where a need for additional support is identified, the trust is quick to offer support using experienced staff from other schools within the trust.

Additional support

Curriculum development work has been supported effectively by the trust, including through the secondment of an experienced senior leader to lead this area of

development since September 2021. Some planned support work from the trust around developing teaching has had to be delayed, or adjusted, due to national guidance aimed at minimising the spread of COVID-19.

The mathematics department has more recently started work with the Great North Maths Hub. This support has already been effective in supporting the development of a well-structured curriculum.

An external review of SEND provision, undertaken by the local authority, has helped shape your developments so that pupils with additional needs are better supported in school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the headteacher. I also met with senior leaders and other staff responsible for the curriculum, behaviour and attendance, and the school's SENDCo. I met with a group of curriculum leaders and with a group of teachers with varying degrees of teaching experience. I visited a range of lessons during which I spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at examples of pupils' work. At break and lunchtime, I spoke with groups of pupils from Years 7 to 11 and observed behaviour around the school site.

I held a virtual meeting with members of the governing committee, including the chair of the committee, and met with the chief executive officer (CEO) of Bishop Bewick Catholic Education Trust and the trust's nominated link adviser for your school.

I reviewed a range of documentary evidence available on the school and trust websites; publicly available information on achievement, behaviour and attendance; governor minutes; subject review reports and your commissioned SEND review.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of Bishop Bewick Catholic Education multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Steve Wren
Her Majesty's Inspector