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20 July 2022

Sarah Took
Headteacher
The Meadows School
Whitworth Lane
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Dear Miss Took

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Meadows School

Following my visit to your school on 10 June 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:

- continue to ensure that pupils have information and guidance to inform them about the negative health effects of smoking and vaping
- consult with members of the school community to ensure policies and procedures are developed to manage smoking and vaping materials on site.

Context

Throughout the pandemic you remained open to support vulnerable pupils. The pandemic interrupted some school development work, including the redevelopment of some outside areas. Plans for developing these areas are now continuing. You have made other areas of the school site safer by adding fencing and shrubbery to deter pupil movement. A chicane has been added outside the school to reduce traffic speed and gates to the school site are now closed during the school day. Staff absence due to COVID-19 was significant. The school has also experienced high levels of staff absence, including that of key leaders, due to other health-related matters.

Since the previous inspection in June 2019, there have been some changes in governors and staff. The local authority is funding the appointment of an interim deputy headteacher and the school has appointed an English and a mathematics teacher, both with additional leadership responsibilities for their subjects. These staff are replacing teachers who have left the school. To add teaching capacity, you have appointed a further two teachers, one in humanities and an additional English teacher. During the summer term, you have also appointed an English teacher and a primary teacher. These posts commence in the new academic year. The school has developed governance. There are now co-chairs of governors and another governor with experience in managing attendance.

Main findings

You have been determined and proactive in moving the school forward since your last inspection. You are taking careful steps to ensure that the school continues to improve. Leaders are clear of which steps to take and when. You demonstrate a strong understanding of your community and the vulnerable pupils that attend the school. The decisions you have taken to move the school forward show integrity and always have the best interests of pupils in mind.

The support and care staff provide to pupils is a real strength in your school. It was a pleasure to meet and talk to pupils. They happily shared their thoughts about their school experience and described what they learn. Their personal development is threaded through many activities in school. All pupils could describe the support that the school had provided for them, sometimes in very difficult circumstances and around sensitive issues. Pupils learn about healthy lifestyles, and they talked with confidence about this. Pupils detailed the improvements in their own behaviour since attending the school. Others have demonstrated significant improvements in attendance since joining.

Pupils are confident and self-assured. They speak honestly to visitors. Pupils appreciated the school's support in teaching them to read. One pupil described not being able to read when joining the school, but now can. Other pupils described receiving regular interventions to improve their reading, including phonics support. Though most pupils do not read for pleasure, all pupils understand its worth. Staff understand the importance of reading. This includes members of the governing body. Governors are able to detail with clarity the work of the school to improve pupils' ability to read.

Smoking and, increasingly, vaping remain a concern, particularly in the wooded areas of the school grounds. Leaders have introduced smoking cessation procedures with the support of the school nursing team. The impact of these procedures has been demonstrated. Pupils can describe the negative health effects of smoking. Nonetheless, pupils report smoking and vaping still happen on site. Leaders have plans to erect fencing to control movement around the school's wooded areas and transform them into forest learning spaces. There is more work to do to manage smoking and vaping materials on site and in educating pupils about the dangers of smoking.

Since the last inspection, leaders have addressed the issues of inaccurate attendance coding. Governors can now challenge attendance in the school. School leaders are able to analyse rates of attendance precisely. Attendance is stable since the return to school after national lockdowns. Leaders have plans to further develop and improve pupils' attendance. These are robust and include educating pupils about the importance of regular attendance.

Governors know the school well and are effective. They are determined to improve the quality of education that pupils experience. Reading is a priority. Since the last inspection, they have supported leaders with a straightforward improvement plan to strengthen the curriculum and improve academic outcomes. All pupils are expected to study GCSE qualifications and the school has added science vocational qualifications in year 9 to broaden pupils' qualification portfolio.

Additional support

School leaders work closely with the local authority. Since the last inspection, local authority representatives have been supporting the school's improvement journey effectively. Governance has been strengthened as a result. The headteacher values this support. Both co-chairs and some other members of the governing body have an education background. The local authority is providing training to further develop governance. The local authority is providing advisers to develop subject leaders and further improve the school's curriculum. They are also providing finances to add capacity to the school leadership team with the appointment of an interim deputy headteacher.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, curriculum leaders, pupils, staff, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I observed breaktime activities around the school, visited lessons, scrutinised documentation, including school improvement and curriculum plans, and checked responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires for parents. I also checked recruitment systems and records.

I am copying this letter to the co-chairs of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

David Mills
Her Majesty's Inspector