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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Philip Hurst
Headteacher
Thomas Mills High School
Saxtead Road
Framlingham
Woodbridge
Suffolk
IP13 9HE

Dear Mr Hurst

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Thomas Mills High School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 16 September 2022, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in November 2021.

During the inspection, I discussed with you, other senior leaders, and trustees the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I reviewed safeguarding records and spoke with trustees, a local authority representative, leaders, staff and pupils about safeguarding arrangements. I also considered the provision for personal development, visited lessons, spoke with groups of pupils, met with teachers, and reviewed the school's information on attendance. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Thomas Mills High School remains inadequate and has serious weaknesses. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the category of concern to be removed.

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Since the previous inspection, you have made changes to the leadership of safeguarding and personal development. In September 2022, an assistant headteacher was appointed to lead the safeguarding team and a senior tutor was appointed as second in charge of safeguarding. In May 2022, two administrators were appointed to add capacity to the monitoring of pupils' attendance. In September 2022, a former deputy headteacher changed roles to lead personal development.

The previous inspection report in November 2021 highlighted weaknesses in leaders' processes of recording, storing and using information to safeguard pupils from harm. Leaders of safeguarding have now introduced an online system for logging and acting on staff concerns about pupils' safety. Leaders have also introduced a more-rigorous system for reviewing this information and checking how helpful the support that vulnerable pupils receive is.

Leaders have introduced a range of channels, including online, for pupils to communicate worries to staff. Leaders have also told pupils clearly and often about the systems pupils can access to 'speak up' and 'speak out' about their concerns. Pupils are increasingly confident that, when they share their concerns, leaders will support them. Pupils say that they feel safe in school.

Each member of the safeguarding team understands their part within the school system to keep pupils safe. School leaders have increased the number of staff trained to lead safeguarding. In addition, pastoral leaders in every year group have undergone further safeguarding training so they are better placed to fulfil their duties. Leaders work more effectively with external safeguarding partners to secure prompt help for the most vulnerable pupils.

Staff recognise that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Teaching and support staff know about recent updates to statutory safeguarding guidance. School leaders check on adults' safeguarding knowledge and use staff meetings to provide regular updates. Staff are reporting their concerns quickly and consistently well. Leaders have made sure that safeguarding records have necessary detail. Trustees, who are responsible for governance, make sure that school leaders are fulfilling statutory duties for safeguarding. Leaders have established a culture of vigilance and safeguarding arrangements are now effective.

Leaders have improved systems for recording and using attendance information. These changes are at a very early stage of implementation. It is too early to judge the impact of this work to bring about necessary improvements over time. Leaders have increased the capacity of the administrative team. Staff in this team routinely check the attendance of pupils, including the most vulnerable. Leaders expect teachers to use information from administrative staff to support pupils to attend regularly. Teachers say that clearer systems in attendance and safeguarding have made their jobs more manageable.

However, some staff are inconsistent in their approach to following up poor attendance. Leaders recognise there is more work to do to connect the dots between attendance and other school information, specifically for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Under the watchful eye of trustees, leaders have developed a more thorough and structured approach to pupils' personal development. Previously, few pupils knew about the protected characteristics or why they were important in modern Britain. Leaders initially added crucial content to assemblies. Leaders listened to pupils' views and considered that pupils needed more opportunities to explore this content in lesson time. From September 2022, pupils are learning a personal development curriculum in lessons. Specialist teachers who have strong subject knowledge now teach this to pupils. This curriculum includes important information that pupils need to know, such as how to keep themselves safe.

The changes to the curriculum for personal development are very new. Their effectiveness has not been reviewed. Leaders have also not finalised the adaptations that might be needed for those with more-complex needs, such as pupils with SEND. Leaders know there is more to do to fill the gaps in knowledge of those pupils who have had the least amount of personal development education, and to convince them of the importance of what they are learning.

Leaders have adapted the school's behaviour policy to use the same words that teachers use in the personal development curriculum. Pupils receive more-consistent messages about what are acceptable views and what are not. Teachers increasingly challenge pupils when they do not show respect for those who are different from themselves. Pupils say that staff are getting better at this, although some adults respond to issues more thoroughly than others.

The school has sought support from external partners. School leaders worked with other schools to learn about their systems for attendance and safeguarding. Leaders now plan to use this support to help them review their systems. Many of these reviews are scheduled but have not taken place at this stage. Trustees have used external advice to bring about improvements in the governance of safeguarding. Trustees are applying this knowledge in the work of a safeguarding and pupil committee, through asking sharper questions about how well the new systems are working.

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 Suffolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Richard Kueh
His Majesty's Inspector