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Matthew Little
Principal
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Dear Mr Little

Requires improvement monitoring inspection of Darwen Vale High School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 22 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 took place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous graded (section 5) inspections.

During the inspection, I discussed with you, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, trustees, governors and other senior leaders 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 also visited a sample of lessons and met with groups of pupils from all year groups to discuss their experience of school life. I reviewed samples of pupils' work. Furthermore, I examined a range of information, including the school development plan and safeguarding documentation. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Darwen Vale High School continues to require improvement. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to become good.

Leaders should take further action to:

- develop the range of support available to pupils who are behind with their reading knowledge so that they catch up quickly with their peers.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, there have been several changes to the senior and middle leadership teams. Some new teaching staff have been recruited and three new governors have been appointed to the local governing committee.

In response to the findings from the previous inspection, you and other senior leaders have made some considerable improvements to the curriculum. For example, you have ensured that the curriculum is increasingly ambitious and that it is equitable for all pupils. This includes those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Added to this, pupils now have access to a wide range of appropriate subjects at key stage 3. The curriculum in key stage 3 is at least as broad and balanced as the national curriculum.

In key stage 4, you have raised the profile of the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) suite of subjects. You are encouraging an increasing number of pupils to take up the Ebacc, should they wish to do so. To ensure that more pupils have the knowledge that they require to study the Ebacc at key stage 4, you have successfully developed the depth and breadth of the curriculum offer in these subjects in key stage 3. Additionally, at key stage 4, pupils can choose from a range of other appropriate option choices. This includes other vocational and academic subjects to meet pupils' needs and interests.

With the support of trust leaders, you have placed a strong focus on the ongoing training of staff. Senior leaders and subject leaders are being supported to develop their subject-specific curriculum knowledge. They are in the process of using this expertise to refine the content of the subject curriculums. Many leaders are increasingly clear about the important knowledge that they want pupils to know. They are ensuring that this content is delivered in a logical way so that pupils can build upon their prior learning.

Some subject leaders are further ahead in their curriculum thinking than others. You also have several subject leaders that are new in post. However, all subject leaders are receiving ongoing support to develop the curriculum effectively. For example, through the weekly coaching programme that leaders provide, subject leaders reflect on the improvements that they are making. This work is helping pupils to build a strong body of knowledge and increasingly to make links across subjects. It is improving how well pupils achieve across the curriculum.

You and other senior leaders have taken suitable action to improve the delivery of the curriculum. Supported by a trust-wide approach, you are ensuring that all teachers have a clear and shared understanding of how to select teaching activities to best secure pupils' learning and development. You and other senior leaders oversee this process thoroughly and subject leaders are increasingly taking part in these checks with you. Pupils told me that they have noticed a more consistent approach to the delivery of the curriculum in their lessons. They explained that this is helping them to remember more over time.

The approaches that you and other senior leaders are implementing to improve teachers' use of assessment are rigorous. Step-by-step guidance for teachers is ensuring that they can quickly identify and address any misconceptions that pupils have in their knowledge. You and other senior leaders are currently refining further your strategies for end-of-unit assessments to ensure the same clarity of approach. This is helping leaders at all levels to check that pupils understand and retain the intended knowledge in the curriculum.

You are ensuring that developing pupils' reading knowledge maintains a high priority in your improvement plans. Senior leaders are introducing a range of whole-school strategies to encourage an enjoyment of reading and to develop pupils' vocabulary. Furthermore, all subject leaders have identified key vocabulary within their schemes of learning. All teachers have received training so that they can ably break down, discuss and teach subject-specific words with pupils. This is helping pupils to develop fluency and confidence in reading. Senior leaders have clear strategies in place to identify and support some pupils who are behind with their reading knowledge. This includes the use of systematic synthetic phonics when required. However, this support is not developed or far-reaching enough to ensure that these pupils catch up as quickly as they could with their reading knowledge. This hinders how well a few pupils access the wider curriculum.

You have been proactive in taking steps to address all other areas highlighted in your previous inspection report. For example, a newly introduced behaviour policy is providing enhanced clarity for staff and pupils. It is increasing teachers' expectations of how well pupils can and should behave. Pupils told me that their lessons are calmer and more orderly. They said that this is helping them to learn. You and other staff are taking effective steps to reinforce this sense of order and politeness between lessons and during breaktimes. In addition, you have strengthened the capacity and support that is available to improve attendance. This is allowing staff to work even more successfully with families. It is also improving pupils' rates of attendance and reducing the number of pupils who are regularly absent from school following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a member of the Aldridge Education multi-academy trust, you and other leaders are provided with effective, ongoing internal support to develop and improve the quality of education for pupils. Trust leaders work closely with the local governing committee. Together they know the school, its staff and the local community well. Leaders appreciate the support and challenge they regularly receive from governors and trustees.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, and the chief executive officer of the Aldridge Education multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Blackburn with Darwen. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Downing
His Majesty's Inspector