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Annabel Stoddart
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Dear Mrs Stoddart

Requires improvement monitoring inspection of Shire Oak Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 9 November 2023 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.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, the chair of the board of trustees and the chair of the local governing board 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 lessons, met with other staff and pupils, scrutinised a range of documents and reviewed the work of pupils. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that pupils in all year groups see that the more rigorous systems and processes to manage behaviour are having a positive impact on their relationships with each other outside the classroom.

Main findings

Significant changes to the school's leadership have greatly increased capacity to sustain the improvement process to become a good school. The broader team now has clear and unambiguous responsibilities allocated to it that align closely to the identified areas of weakness but also ensure that the wider life of the school is not forgotten. Trust level oversight is appropriate and focused on ensuring that school leaders have the support, challenge and resources they need to move forward. Importantly, the school now has a full complement of staff, and pupils have noticed the difference this has made to their learning.

Leaders moved quickly to begin the improvements required in the key stage 3 curriculum following the last inspection. They made effective use of existing good practice in the school as well as accessing support from trust colleagues and other schools. As a result, faculty leaders have been supported to take a leading role in overseeing curriculum development in all subjects. There has been a very specific focus on identifying the end-points they want pupils to achieve. Crucially, this focus encompassed a careful consideration of what pupils need to learn and when in each subject so that end-points are achieved. Early signs are that pupils feel better prepared for key stage 4. For instance, subjects where the revised curriculum was implemented quickly have already seen an increase in the number of pupils choosing them at GCSE.

The purpose and intent of curriculum planning is well understood by those with leadership responsibilities. It is now also increasingly seen as a highly effective resource by teachers implementing it. This is a consequence of the time spent and focus on developing a shared pedagogy to do so. Pupils report that they feel well supported in their learning in nearly all subjects. They were very confident that they will get extra help when they need it. They know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. Nonetheless, leaders at all levels agree that there is more work to do, not least because the 2023 outcomes for pupils have highlighted the gaps that need to be addressed for year groups who have experienced the previous curriculum.

Reading is now high on the school's agenda. Form tutor reading time is enjoyed by pupils and tutors alike. The library is well used and well stocked, providing a vibrant learning environment. Increasingly, weaker readers are being supported to catch up. The school has developed an effective programme to help pupils to develop their comprehension and fluency, supported by well-trained sixth-form students. Leaders understand that the next steps are to ensure that baseline testing provides a more precise diagnosis of need so that interventions can be targeted.

Staff's management of behaviour during social times was highlighted as an area of weakness at the last inspection. Systems and processes have been overhauled. The expectation that all staff will address poor behaviour no matter where it occurs is well understood and embedded. There is some evidence that improvements have been secured. For instance, recorded removals from classrooms have reduced significantly. However, older pupils perceive little change in behaviour. They say that a small number of pupils still display aggression and disrupt lessons. Conversely, pupils in key stage 3 said that they all get along well in social times because they know what behaviours are expected and what will be challenged. As a result, they said that bullying is rare. All pupils agreed that they learn about healthy relationships and the importance of treating others with respect, and learn to expect the same for themselves.

Attendance has become a focus for the school, since the last inspection, with a significant minority of pupils identified as severely absent. However, leaders are doing all that they can to minimise absence. A persistent focus on identifying, taking action and monitoring impact is making inroads. Work to engage better with parents is also having a positive impact, both in terms of improving the attendance of some pupils and also in better relationships with some parents. This is because, increasingly, they are seeing the school as a vehicle for support rather than the source of a problem.

Staff morale is high because they feel very well supported by leaders at both school and trust level. They appreciate the training they have received and recognise that the work they are doing towards improvement will reduce workload in the long term. 'Workshop Wednesdays' are seen by staff as a real boon, allowing them to plan, do and review in a way they were not previously able to do. The additional opportunities this creates for collaboration and sharing good practice are having a positive impact on the development of pedagogical skills.

Leaders are passionate about improving the school but do not take the journey lightly. They recognise that it is collegiate, and that the process itself – not yet complete – is part of the 'cure', as staff develop their capacity and skill along the way.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO of The Mercian Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Walsall. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Mel Ford
His Majesty's Inspector