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Mr Alex Wills
The Headteacher
Ferndown Upper School
Cherry Grove
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Dear Mr Wills

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Ferndown Upper School

Following my visit to your school on 21 May 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection. Please pass my thanks on to the other senior leaders and to the members of the governing body I met.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in January 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and one other governor, and a representative of the local authority. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement and action plans were evaluated.

Context

At the time of the visit, a number of changes that had been made prior to the most recent inspection, such as to the curriculum, were more established. Further changes to senior and middle leadership are planned to take effect from September. There has been no change to the school's status and it is still maintained by the local authority.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The headteacher, other senior leaders and the governing body are clear about what the school needs to do to improve and about how quickly these improvements need to take place. They are already taking appropriate actions to bring this about. These are included in a series of action plans with clear indicators of how the impact on improving the quality of teaching and students' achievement will be monitored and evaluated. The plans are fully costed and approved by the governing body.

A number of significant changes had been made to the curriculum and to the monitoring of students' progress prior to the most recent inspection. The impact of these is becoming increasingly apparent as improvements in students' achievement work through. Improvements have also been made to the quality of teaching to ensure greater consistency in key areas, such as the assessment of students' work and raising the quality of feedback to students on what they need to do to improve. The school's own data show that there has been a significant improvement in students' achievement, including for students in the sixth form, and gaps in achievement are closing more rapidly. Improvements in the quality of teaching have been confirmed by an external review. The school undertakes rigorous analysis to ensure the accuracy and reliability of achievement data.

There is a good focus on evaluating the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of other actions, such as the use of pupil premium funding, through the impact on students' progress over time. Training and support are in place to ensure that all subject leaders do this well. Teachers are being trained and supported to make sure that all make better use of the information they have about students' current progress in their planning and teaching.

The school's approaches to dealing with the low levels of literacy and low reading ages of students when they enter the school at the start of Year 9 are comprehensive and becoming increasingly effective. The school fully recognises that this is essential to continue to raise achievement in all areas of the curriculum.

The appointment of the first director of teaching and learning, as a 'senior middle leader', has been fully evaluated and shown to be effective. The plan to extend this, with three further directors from September, to improve the leadership of teaching is a good step. The plan has been checked by the governors and local authority to ensure it is financially sustainable.

While recognising the need for improvements to be rapid, the school leadership carefully evaluates changes before applying them to the whole school. A good example is the improvements made in English to give students more time to reflect on the feedback they receive, to take action, and for teachers to carefully check the result on the quality of their work.

Governors are well informed and have a good depth of understanding of what the school needs to do to improve and about how quickly improvement needs to take place. They have a good understanding of how to use performance data and undertake their own analysis to ask the headteacher, other senior leaders and subject leaders probing and challenging questions. The governing body seems to have the full range of the skills and expertise needed to hold the school to account. However, although an external review of governance is planned, it has not yet taken place. This needs to happen as a matter of urgency.

The review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding has also not yet taken place. Even though governors fully understand that they should probe evidence of the effect of any actions taken by the school on students' achievement, they would value an external review and this should also take place as a matter of urgency.

Changes within the local authority school improvement services have led to some lack of consistency in the support provided for the school. However, they have worked with the school since the inspection to provide support with improvement planning, financial management and external reviews.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The school's improvement and action plans are fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Dorset and The Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector