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Mr Jonathan Kemp
Falconer School
Falconer Road
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Dear Mr Kemp

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Falconer School

Following my visit to your school on 3 July 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and other senior leaders, representatives of the governing body and the local authority. The school improvement and action plans were evaluated alongside subject improvement plans. Together we looked at school based data relating to pupils' attainment and progress, and discussed a range of key policy documents. Accompanied by you, I visited a range of lessons looking at pupils' work and examples of marking.

Context

There have been no significant changes since the last inspection. In January 2014, following your secondment to Falconer School as interim headteacher, prior to the section 5 inspection, you were appointed as the substantive headteacher. One teacher has left the school and a replacement has been appointed.

Main findings

Your appointment as a substantive head has provided stability. You have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and have set a clear direction for improvement. These have already begun to help pupils learn more effectively. However, this depth of understanding is not consistently shared by other senior managers and governors.

School and subject improvement plans are purposeful and precise. They accurately define what needs to be achieved, the actions that will be taken to meet these aims and who is responsible for the actions. However, the plans, particularly subject plans, do not always state how you will measure the impact of actions on pupils' learning. This limits their usefulness as a means of monitoring the effectiveness of improvements.

Teachers are beginning to set challenging long term targets for pupils. Senior leaders are keeping a close check on pupils' progress towards them and assessments are more accurate due to the joint work taking place with another school to moderate teachers' judgements. This is giving an increasingly accurate picture of how well different groups and subjects are performing.

Although not yet embedded in all subject areas, information about pupils' levels of attainment is now being used to assist in the planning of lessons. The school's focus on marking and feedback has been effective and its improving quality was evident in pupils' books. Pupils now know more clearly the things they do well and the areas they need to improve but pupils do not always respond to this marking.

There are systems in place to reward good behaviour and pupils enjoy the increasing amounts of freedom they are being given. Systems for recording behavioural incidents are not brought together sufficiently well and analysed in depth in order to understand which strategies are most effective and where additional support and investigation are required to further improve behaviour.

The school is holding teachers to account for the quality of their teaching and for pupils' progress through the improved lesson observation system. Individual staff improvement plans have been put into place where needed and these have been effective. Opportunities to share the emerging best practice amongst teachers are at an early stage.

School leaders and governors consultation with parents and pupils is starting to inform decision making. For example, their introduction of supervised 'homework' at school has proved a popular move and pupils are responding well to this. Teachers are beginning to use the information from their checks on homework to inform their planning for the next lesson. The school rightly has higher expectations of Key Stage 4 students. They are expected to work at home to develop independence in study skills. This is preparing pupils well for their next stage: three Year 11 students have gained places for next year on GCE 'A' level courses at a local mainstream school.

Another two students will also be going into the same school to follow NVQ qualification courses.

Governors have supported the school well through a period of considerable change. New, experienced governors are well-qualified to challenge the school where appropriate and do not hesitate to do so. Governors recognise a need for training in the analysis of school performance data so that they can be less dependent on information and analyses provided by the headteacher.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

Senior leaders and governors say they have valued the range of support offered by the local authority. Joint observations of teaching have been carried out and support has been given to staff to improve their marking and feedback. This has started to have an impact and the higher expectations are ensuring that pupils are being challenged to do their best. The local authority has also arranged partnerships with other schools which are having positive impact on the quality of teaching. A mentor has been put in place to support the new headteacher. The support from the local authority has also resulted in members of the governing body beginning to make better use of the information they receive in order to hold school leaders to account for their work.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Mary Rayner
Her Majesty's Inspector