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Mrs Alison Waspe
Executive Headteacher
Emerson Valley School
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Dear Mrs Waspe

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Emerson Valley School

Following my visit to your school on 28 November 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 July 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. The school should take further action to increase the leadership capacity of the school by:

- ensuring that there are clear plans in place to develop senior and middle leadership
- reviewing the work of the governing body and ensuring any necessary training and support, so that governors are fully involved in planning, and hold senior leaders to account, for the improvement of the school.

Evidence

During the inspection I met with you and other senior leaders, team leaders, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. We walked around school to see classes at work. I talked informally with parents as they brought their children to school, evaluated the school improvement plan and looked at other key documents.

Context

You joined the school at the start of this term, initially as a consultant headteacher. When the headteacher left at the end of September you agreed to take on the role of executive headteacher for three days per week. A local authority officer is associate headteacher for the rest of the week. There have been several changes to the teaching staff since the inspection in July 2014.

Main findings

It is clear that staff and governors feel that the findings of the recent inspection were fair. The recognition that the school no longer requires significant improvement has boosted morale. No-one is under any illusion about what still has to be achieved, but there is a positive approach to tackling it. Staff and governors attribute this 'mood change' to strong leadership and clear direction from you and the associate headteacher.

You have wasted no time in setting out your expectations of staff. Senior leaders and the local authority have been into all classrooms to check how good teaching is. As a result, you already have a clear view of where teaching is stronger and where it needs to improve. To complete the picture you need to take account of pupils' learning over time. You plan to do this before the end of term, once information from upcoming assessments is available. Arrangements are in place for some staff to attend training to develop their skills further. It is important that the individual actions plans intended to ensure that all teaching is consistently good or better are put in place as soon as possible.

You and the associate headteacher have worked with the local authority to update the school improvement plan. Rightly, it is closely linked to the priorities identified by the inspection to improve teaching, achievement and leadership and management. The overview of what will happen each term is clear and logical. The milestones will help you check at the end of each term that you have done everything that was planned. Targets for pupils' achievement at age 11 in July 2015 will enable you to measure how successful you have been. You know that these targets, while ambitious for the pupils given their underachievement in the past, are not high enough for the school to be judged good. Targets for future years will be higher. The actions in the improvement plan are appropriate, but not all are precise enough,

for example how senior and middle leaders' skills will be developed. There is insufficient detail at the moment about costs to ensure that plans are affordable. Start and finish dates are not always specific, meaning that there is potential for slippage or overload points. Mapping activities over the term, and making sure that staff responsible for leading activities are not monitoring their implementation, would help check that the plan stays on track. Setting out interim targets for pupils' achievement would give staff milestones to aim for and help governors to measure progress during the year.

Changes to the teaching of writing and mathematics this term are having a positive impact on teaching and learning. You have evidence from looking at pupils' work that their writing and mathematical skills are improving. On our walk around school I saw teachers modelling for pupils how to improve their writing and explaining clearly how to tackle calculations. It is early days, but information about the levels pupils are working at is better used to target pupils and raise expectations. The most-able pupils in mathematics are taught separately to ensure they are challenged. Pupils who are not doing as well as they should have been identified for extra support. Appropriate plans are in place to regularly review how effective interventions have been and decide what happens next.

You recognise the need to increase leadership capacity to share responsibility for improving a school of this size. To this end, you are in the process of appointing leaders for the English and mathematics teams. They will lead developments and monitor progress in the subjects across the school. Team leaders are increasingly sharing responsibility for improvement in their year groups. They appreciate the clear direction you have given them so they know exactly what is expected when they lead meetings or have time to check on the work of teachers in their year group. Team meetings are better used to focus on how teaching and pupils' achievement can be improved. Team leaders draw on their own experience and expertise to support their teams. The training they have had for their role varies and sessions to develop their skills have been overtaken by other priorities recently. Overall, plans for developing the leadership skills of senior and middle leaders are not clear enough.

You have listened carefully to parents' concerns since you have been at the school. In response, you have improved the timeliness of information they receive so that they know what is happening until the end of term. The parents I spoke to were generally positive about the school, although it was apparent they were not all clear about how reading and mathematics were taught or how they could support their child's learning at home. You are addressing this through workshops for parents.

Governors are very supportive of the school and plan to survey parents' views next term to help improve partnerships. Individual governors are linked to year groups or subjects to get to know the work of the school. Governors receive information, for example about pupils' achievement or how additional funding is spent. They do not,

however, always fully understand the information or ask sufficiently searching questions to check if achievement is high enough or funding is used well. Governors have identified, quite rightly, the need for training to be more effective in their role. In the recent past, they have relied too much on the local authority holding senior leaders to account. Governors need to be more strategic, rather than concerned with day-to-day matters, if they are to ensure that Emerson Valley becomes a good school. They should be more involved in agreeing improvement plans, including costs. Governors need to be clear what they are expecting the school to achieve and how and when they will monitor the progress and evaluate the impact of action plans.

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

The local authority has provided a good deal of support and challenge to the school since the inspection that took place in January 2013. It is committed to the school's further improvement. To that end, officers arranged for you and the associate headteacher to lead the school and have allocated significant resources again this school year. Support will be provided directly through local authority advisers or through a local teaching school. The improvement partner's role is, appropriately, shifting to focus more on monitoring and challenging the impact of senior leaders and governors. She will play a key role in supporting and advising governors as they recruit a permanent headteacher. Senior officers will continue to monitor the school's progress through termly meetings.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Bradley
Her Majesty's Inspector