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Mr A Wills
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wills

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Ferndown Upper School

Following my visit to your school on 23 and 24 March 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in January 2014. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

I recommend that the next inspection should be a full section 5 inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. 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.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching across all subjects, especially in English, so that it is consistently good by:
 - ensuring teachers use the information about how well students are doing to plan lessons that help all students learn more, especially the most and least able
 - making sure that the work set for students is always set at the right level so that all students, including those who are disabled and those with special educational needs, achieve as well as they can
 - ensuring that activities and approaches used in lessons capture students' interests and help them become more involved in their learning and think for themselves
 - ensuring that marking gives students clear and detailed feedback on how well they are doing and information about how to improve their work, reach their targets and understand examination requirements
 - improving the consistency in performance in the sixth form by eradicating the variances of teaching between AS and A2 examination courses.

- Raise attainment and accelerate progress for all groups of students, especially boys, the most able, students who are eligible for the pupil premium, disabled students and those who have special educational needs, across a range of subjects, especially in English, by:
 - ensuring the gaps in attainment and progress between different groups of students across the school are narrowed so that they all achieve well
 - ensuring that students who are persistently absent achieve better examination results by attending more regularly and that strategies are in place to ensure they catch up
 - reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions so that all students are able to achieve their potential by being in school and attending lessons.

- Ensure leaders and managers, including governors, secure more rapid improvements by:
 - increasing the pace with which changes are introduced to improve achievement and progress
 - ensuring there is greater consistency in the quality of teaching and marking across all subjects
 - developing the skills of governors so that they can check that leaders are bringing about necessary improvements
 - sharing more widely the good practice that currently exists in school.

- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

- An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 23 and 24 March 2015

Evidence

The inspector met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and vice chair, and the local authority School Evaluation Partner. The inspector also visited lessons across a wide range of subjects and all year groups. These visits were undertaken with senior and/or middle leaders. The focus of the monitoring inspection was to evaluate the progress the school had made since the previous visit.

Context

There have been no changes to senior or middle leadership since the previous visit. The lessons of a number of absent teachers are being covered by temporary staff.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The school's senior and middle leaders have addressed all of the improvement points arising from the January 2014 inspection and from the three subsequent monitoring inspections. The actions they have taken are now consistently applied across the school. There has been significant and rapid improvement since the last monitoring visit in January 2015. Governors are undertaking more independent analysis of, for example, achievement data to provide more challenge to senior and curriculum leaders. The quality of teaching has improved so that most is now consistently good and some outstanding. Students' achievement is much improved as a result. Students' attendance has improved. They are responding well to the improved teaching and show improved attitudes to their learning.

- Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement are:
 - the impact of the very well-coordinated monitoring of the quality of teaching and students' progress and achievement
 - the quality of leadership provided by the key curriculum leaders
 - the role of the three heads of house in raising the achievement of the students who need the most support
 - the significant improvements in teachers' use of assessment information in their planning and teaching and the impact of this on raising students' achievement
 - retaining the strong focus on the all-round personal development and well-being of all students, alongside raising their achievement.

The procedures for monitoring students' progress and the quality of teaching are now extensive and extremely rigorous. Leaders ensure that their evaluation of the quality of teaching is based on how well the students are achieving. The procedures make sure that no student 'falls through the net'. Any students needing more

support or challenge, those at risk of falling behind and those with complex needs or who are vulnerable are identified quickly and staff respond swiftly and effectively. Key middle leaders, the directors of learning and heads of faculty involve all staff in their curriculum area in frequent and extensive work scrutiny and checks on students' progress. The three heads of house monitor the progress of the students in their care very carefully to ensure that the support they provide meets the needs of these students extremely well. They work well with a wide range of external agencies to ensure the support is of the highest quality. Their monitoring of the impact of all of the actions taken is rigorous, enabling them to try alternative methods when necessary. Information about individual students is shared with all of the teachers that need it so that the support is coordinated very well. Senior leaders carry out frequent work scrutiny, meetings with students, checks on progress data and lesson observations to provide another layer of monitoring. These arrangements are now fully established and having the intended effect of raising students' achievement and improving their attendance and attitudes to school.

Since January, leaders have focused relentlessly on ensuring that all teachers make full and effective use of the assessment information they have on their classes and their own tracking of individual students' progress. As a result, teachers plan and teach lessons that meet students' needs well. The 'reflections on students' progress' sheets provide a very good mechanism for this and these are generally used well. Leaders provide teachers with regular updates on the classes they teach to identify any students falling behind as well as those making rapid progress. Teachers' marking of students' work provides good feedback and mostly makes clear what students need to do to improve. Students respond well to this feedback. However, the practice of a small number of teachers is still not good enough. The key curriculum leaders are making good use of the good and outstanding teaching in their areas to support those teachers that need to improve. Senior leaders make effective use of support plans when teachers have the willingness and ability to improve. They use formal capability procedures when necessary.

Students behave well in lessons and many show much more enthusiasm for their learning than observed on previous visits. They have responded well to the improvements in teaching. Many say how much they enjoy lessons now. They value the attention they receive to help them do as well as they can.

Rigorous and extensive tests are used to ensure that the school's data on students' progress and achievement are reliable and accurate. The current data show that students' achievement in English and mathematics is much improved from the 2014 results. Students are making at least good progress in both subjects. This was verified by the inspector's checks of students' work and conversations with them. The gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and others in the school and between boys and girls have closed significantly. In lower year groups, they have almost closed. The most able students now make at least good progress in English, mathematics and science. Students also make good progress across a wide range of other subjects. Those students with low starting points and those who are

disabled or have special educational needs are now making particularly strong progress because of the high-quality teaching and support they receive.

The school improves the reading and writing skills of those who need this when they join at the start of Year 9, which is almost half of the year group. This work has helped to significantly raise the achievement of the students now in Year 10 who received this support when they were in Year 9. A small group currently in Year 9 is having focused support to develop their basic numeracy skills. These students have made extremely rapid progress and they are very well prepared for GCSE courses in Year 10.

Teaching in the sixth form is better focused on the progress of individual students. Students make more effective use of independent study time to complete set work and prepare for lessons. Teachers provide good feedback and students use this well to improve their work. The school's data on students currently in the sixth form show that the previous gaps in achievement in some subjects for students with similar starting points have narrowed significantly. Progress in previously weaker subjects is also much improved for current students.

Students are very well prepared for their next steps, whether they leave the school at the end of Year 11 or Year 13. They are provided with individual high-quality careers guidance so that they are fully informed about the full range of options open to them. Alongside the improvements in academic achievement across the school, the school leaders have sustained the strengths of the school in the personal development and well-being of the students. This is an important aspect of the school as many students need this personal support.

External support

The school has recently received good support from the local authority. Visits from the local authority School Evaluation Partner and the local area adviser have helped the school evaluate the impact of the actions it has taken and make sure they are focused well on key priorities. The school has established good links with other schools in the area to provide specific support in some subject areas. The school has also made strong links with Frome Community College, a school with a similar character that has been through the same improvement process and is now a good school. The college has helped with ideas for tracking students' progress and for teachers' marking of students' work.