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Mrs D Dru
Elmtree School
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Dear Mrs Dru

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Elmtree School

Following my visit to your school on 21 October 2015, 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 2015. 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 in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher, other leaders, a group of governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative from the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust (BLT) which provides support on behalf of the local authority, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I visited classes with you and the deputy headteacher, looked at work in pupils' books and reviewed documentation, including the school's improvement plan, minutes of governors' meetings and external reports from advisers. I checked documentation and information linked to safeguarding.

Context

A new deputy headteacher joined the school this term, and two teachers, who were on the staff at the time of the previous inspection, have taken on leadership responsibilities. The inclusion coordinator has returned from maternity leave. There have been several changes on the teaching team and the school began this academic year with a full complement of permanent teachers. There is also a new Chair of the Governing Body who took up her role this term.

Main findings

Following the section 5 inspection in March 2015, there was a period of transition, during which some staff and governors struggled to accept that Elmtree School required improvement. You have taken effective steps to ensure that both the staff and the governing body now know what needs to be done and that everyone is motivated to improve the school. The school is well positioned to make rapid progress.

You have rightly focused on restructuring the leadership team so that you have the necessary support to drive and embed improvements. The appointments of the deputy headteacher and middle leaders are very positive as this means you no longer have to do everything yourself.

Governors undertook the required review of governance. Their action plan details how the recommendations will be implemented. They have sensibly reviewed roles and responsibilities to ensure governors with the necessary skills are allocated appropriate areas of responsibility. The appointment of the new Chair of the Governing Body is very positive as she understands what actions need to be taken to improve the school. Governors have rightly identified that their current priority is to develop their knowledge of assessment so that they can be sure of where improvements are and are not being made.

The review of pupil premium funding has been carried out and the recommendations are being implemented. Leaders now recognise that the funds to support disadvantaged pupils have not helped these pupils to catch up. Careful consideration is being given to what the money is used for. However, there is no progress information to evidence that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is closing.

Middle leaders are new to their roles; despite this, they demonstrate a clear understanding of their responsibilities and how they plan to drive improvements. They know what needs to be done and are being supported to develop their skills to carry out the full scope of their roles.

Leaders have taken effective action to improve practice in the Nursery and the Reception classes. Early years staff are becoming more skilled at observing what

children can do and are using the information to plan how to develop them further. Most adults ask relevant questions to encourage children to extend their thinking. Many activities are well planned to enthuse and engage children, although this is not always the case.

Teaching in Years 1 and 2 is improving, but the quality continues to be inconsistent. Teachers have benefited from working with staff from a local nursery and infant school to see ways in which they can develop their own practice. All teachers consistently follow the marking and feedback policy, so pupils understand how they can improve their work. The regular assessment of what pupils can do is also helping teachers to plan activities which match pupils' abilities and learning needs. However, teachers still do not check pupils' understanding in lessons regularly enough. This means that not all learning time is used well because pupils are spending time on tasks which do not challenge them.

The improvement plan details clearly what needs to be done to tackle the identified weaknesses and shows how leaders and governors will know their actions have been successful. The plan rightly identifies how much progress pupils need to make, but leaders and governors are not rigorous in checking that this is happening.

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

External support

The support provided by BLT is relevant and effective. The new adviser has rightly prioritised getting to know the school, so that the pace of improvement is not slowed. Useful support has been provided for the early years, mathematics, English and the development of middle leaders' skills. BLT brokered the reviews of governance and the way the pupil premium grant is used.

Chestnut Lane School, a local nursery and infant school, is providing generous support and development for middle leaders and teachers. The opportunities to work collaboratively are helping all staff to reflect on what can be achieved.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Louise Adams
Her Majesty's Inspector