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25 January 2016

Mr Allan Osborne
Headteacher
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Bury Lane
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Dear Mr Osborne

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Epping St John's Church of England VC School

Following my visit to your school on 14 January 2016 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 on 24–25 June 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. The school should take further action to:

- rigorously monitor the impact of the actions that have been taken to improve the school
- ensure that high expectations of pupils are enforced by all leaders and teachers across the school
- further develop strategies to ensure that pupils behave well when travelling to and from school and when moving around the school site
- ensure that the review of pupil premium spending is carried out as a matter of urgency.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, some of your senior leaders, subject leaders, pupils, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Documents including school improvement plans, behaviour and bullying logs and communications from parents were scrutinised. During two joint walks of the school with you, I observed pupils at work in lessons and evaluated how they conducted themselves when moving around the school. I also scrutinised a range of pupils' work from years 7 to 11.

Context

Since the last inspection there have been significant changes at the school. You took up your post in January 2016, taking over from an interim executive headteacher who led the school for the autumn term. The mathematics department is now led by an assistant headteacher and there are new subject leaders both in science and in business studies. As a school, you have appointed additional deputy leaders in both mathematics and English. Also, a new special educational needs coordinator took up post in September 2015. Since the last inspection, 23 teachers have left the school and 33 teachers have joined. As a result, there has been a significant reduction in the number of temporary teachers working at the school. The pastoral system has been restructured with new posts of Year Progress Leaders introduced in September 2015. The governing body has been reconstituted under a new Chair of the Governing Body and a new sixth form opened in September 2015, where there are 29 learners currently.

Main findings

Since the last inspection leaders, including governors, have taken, and continue to take, careful and effective action to address the most pressing priorities needed to improve the school. As a consequence staff report that morale is rising and pupils already speak positively about your impact, the improvements in some of their lessons and in the behaviour in school.

You have appropriately planned to accelerate the pace of improvement. Early indications are that your 'rapid action plan' is already having an impact in some areas across the school. This plan lacks some additional milestones to enable leaders to frequently and closely monitor the progress being made towards your ambitious targets. Not all leaders are yet modelling the high expectations and leadership required to ensure that the school makes rapid and sustainable improvements.

You and your leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of teaching across the school. Your team has acted upon the findings of an external audit of

teaching, learning and assessment and has made changes to the way in which they judge the effectiveness of teaching. You are now more able to allocate appropriate support and challenge to teachers who require this to improve the standard of their teaching. While it is too early to see the impact of this action on the progress of pupils over time, early evidence is that practice is strengthening in some areas, such as mathematics and English.

You are providing clear direction and setting high expectations of the quality of teaching required to ensure that pupils make the progress of which they are capable. Already, where these expectations are met and work is well matched to the capabilities and interests of pupils, for example in a Year 11 mathematics lesson, pupils are responding with enthusiasm and demonstrating their potential. However teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are still not high enough. Examples were seen where pupils in Year 10 and Year 11 are already meeting their target grades for the academic year, without appropriate additional challenge given by their teachers. Similarly, teachers' expectations of how work should be presented still vary too widely. Poorly presented and careless work is not challenged on a consistent basis. Teachers are not consistently applying your school's recently adopted feedback policy. When feedback is used in line with this policy, it is useful in accelerating progress, as was seen in history and English lessons. There is evidence that some pupils are developing mature responses and improving their work, but this is not uniformly the case and therefore not as effective as it could be.

Evidence from published examination results shows that standards continued to decline in 2015 and were significantly below those achieved by pupils nationally. Disadvantaged pupils did not make sufficient progress and the gaps in achievement with their peers were too wide. Evidence seen during this monitoring visit indicates that standards are starting to rise across a range of subjects. You are aware that this improvement is not consistent across all year groups, or for all groups of pupils, and requires significant improvement if the school is to be judged good at its next inspection.

The recently appointed coordinator for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is developing their provision effectively. Although the expectation is that teachers work closely with the teaching assistants to carefully plan the learning for these pupils, this does not always happen. This lack of communication slows the progress that these pupils are able to make. Where the recently introduced strategies, such as personal learning menus, are used effectively pupils with special educational needs are enjoying lessons and are making faster progress as a result. This was evident for pupils in a Year 10 English lesson when analysing *A Christmas Carol*.

You are adopting a clear and robust approach to eradicating incidents of poor behaviour and promoting excellent behaviour. Expectations of pupils' behaviour are high and the majority of pupils are already responding very well to these

expectations. Although exclusions rose at the start of this academic year, they have been reducing each month as pupils' behaviour continues to improve. Pupils explain that behaviour in many lessons has improved significantly. Where the teaching interests and enthuses pupils, they behave well, as was evident in a Year 9 science lesson. However, where activities are not carefully planned to challenge pupils they can lose interest and become distracted.

Teachers are more willing to challenge poor behaviour; however, this is still not consistently the case and this causes annoyance to the overwhelming majority of pupils who want to learn. There are still incidents of inconsiderate behaviour on the corridors and evidence of this boisterous behaviour was seen during the monitoring inspection. Pupils and staff report that this has reduced dramatically since leaders have adopted a high profile around the school site. Pupils also report that a minority of pupils behave in an unacceptable way on the journey to and from school.

Under the skilful leadership of the new Chair of the Governing Body, the reconstituted governing body is better placed to offer strategic leadership for the school. The new governance structure is clearly aligned to the school priorities. However, governors need more training to be able to challenge leaders effectively on the standards of education being provided.

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 school is making use of a wide range of external support. An effective partnership with a local school is helping leaders at all levels to develop their practice, for example in special educational needs. Leaders are working closely with the local authority, which is providing appropriate support on a weekly basis, in particular working with the governors and senior leaders.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Essex Local Authority and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

John Lucas

Her Majesty's Inspector