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Mr A Swindell
Principal
Steiner Academy Exeter
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Devon
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Dear Mr Swindell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Steiner Academy Exeter

Following my visit to your school on 19 April 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 in May 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 previous section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to speed up the rate of improvements in teaching and learning by:

- extending the monitoring and evaluation skills of all senior and subject leaders so that they are able to identify gaps in learning and provide relevant support
- defining expectations of learning and progress throughout the school, and refining the procedures for assessing achievement accordingly
- developing teachers' skills in assessing pupils' understanding, and in adapting lessons and providing feedback to ensure all make good progress, including the most-able pupils, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and middle leaders, a group of pupils, the chair of the governing body and the governor responsible for safeguarding to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. The school's improvement plan was evaluated. All classes were observed by you together with the inspector. We also looked at samples of books, including those of the most-able pupils and of pupils eligible for support from the pupil premium (additional government funding for pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority).

Context

The school moved into its new building in September 2015. It is an all-through academy free school for pupils aged 4 to 16 years. Currently there are no pupils aged 15 to 16 years and only two pupils aged 11 years. Pupils study the Steiner curriculum. Children in the early years are exempt from some specific areas of learning and there is no requirement for the school to conduct national curriculum teacher assessments for pupils aged seven years.

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils eligible for support from the pupil premium is below average. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is above average. Since the recent section 5 inspection, the number of pupils on roll has increased to 258.

There has also been an increase in the number of staff, including the appointment of a subject leader for English. A vice-principal was recently appointed to join the senior leadership team, which comprises the principal, vice-principal, early years leader and the special educational needs coordinator. The vice-principal is covering the leadership of mathematics until a subject specialist is appointed in September.

Main findings

Governors have undertaken an external review as recommended at the section 5 inspection. This included a skills audit, which has resulted in changes in the governing body to ensure governors have the necessary range of expertise. Governors have a clear understanding of their role in holding senior leaders to account for the standards that pupils reach and in ensuring suitable strategic direction for the school. Through their frequent visits, they are gaining a more in-depth knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, including in the quality of teaching and learning. The governors have set clear expectations for senior leaders' monitoring and evaluation of pupils' academic progress and behaviour and attendance. They have identified the need for more short-term, measurable outcomes to enable them to monitor progress towards the actions identified in the school's improvement plan. The plan suitably addresses the areas for improvement identified in the section 5 inspection, but the expected outcomes are not clearly defined.

Together with the special educational needs coordinator, you are monitoring teaching and learning more rigorously than at the time of the section 5 inspection. As the pupils enter the school in different year groups, their prior learning is appropriately assessed using tests for spelling, reading and mathematics. However, there is, as yet, no assessment of their writing as part of this baseline evaluation. Assessment information is being used increasingly to identify and address any gaps in learning, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, the most able and those who have special educational needs or disability. You and the special educational needs coordinator hold teachers and teaching assistants to account for their pupils' achievement through individual meetings with them each term. The meetings include the examination of progress information and a sample of pupils' books, together with the current behaviour log. You also observe pupils' progress in lessons. Through the more robust system for the performance management of teachers, you identify their most relevant training needs. This is leading to improvements in the teaching and learning of English and mathematics.

This monitoring activity does not yet extend to other senior and middle leaders, most of whom are new to the school. Therefore, they are not yet in a position to identify the support they need to give to individual members of staff. This is not accelerating the rate of improvements in teaching and learning, particularly in teachers' use of assessment and feedback. You are developing a suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' attainment to help teachers to check pupils' progress and to inform their lesson planning. This is most advanced in English, where the subject leader is defining progression in writing across the school so that teachers know precisely what is expected. In other subjects, staff do not have the same information to help them to assess pupils' progress.

Teachers are keen to improve their practice in keeping with Steiner principles and to promote consistently good achievement, including for the most-able pupils. However, there are inconsistencies in the degree to which teachers check pupils' understanding and adapt their lessons to ensure that all pupils make good progress, especially the most able and those who have special educational needs or disability. An example of the increasingly effective practice was seen in a Year 5 mathematics lesson on equivalent fractions. All pupils were challenged to select appropriate methods and to explain them, with the most-able pupils working in hundreds and thousands. The teacher checked for misconceptions and addressed them promptly. The work in their books showed that all pupils were making good progress in applying calculation skills in problem solving.

Teachers are marking pupils' books more regularly, but they are not yet informing pupils precisely what they need to do to improve their work, especially in writing. Pupils are encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences, although there is little evidence to show that they are systematically developing evaluation skills.

The pupil premium is used appropriately to provide additional support for eligible pupils in lessons and in therapy sessions. The impact is seen in improvements in the pupils' communication skills. The school ensures that these pupils are able to take part in residential experiences and in music lessons. Staff have received suitable attachment training to support pupils who are looked after by the local authority.

The primary physical education and sports premium is also used appropriately to increase opportunities for sport, including extending swimming lessons to more year groups, and providing training for staff. The after-school games club is increasingly well attended.

Pupils are eager to learn and respond especially well when they are challenged to think more deeply about their work. However, they do not all take pride in the presentation of their work. Some, but not all, pupils learn to write in a cursive style that helps them to capture their ideas quickly. Some pupils with low prior attainment are not learning strategies to support their spelling, and this slows down the writing process for them. Pupils particularly excel in the creative aspects of the curriculum, such as baking bread or dying wool in 'handwork' lessons, and they sing exceptionally well. As explained by one of the pupils, 'the school enables you to find out what you enjoy and what you are particularly good at'. This, together with the positive relationships they form with each other and with their teachers, helps the pupils to develop in confidence and self-esteem.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons has improved due to the consistent application by all staff of the new behaviour policy and procedures. Pupils' attendance is improving, albeit slowly, due to the school's work in raising pupils' and parents' understanding of the importance of good attendance and punctuality in avoiding gaps in pupils' learning and improving their achievement.

You and your staff have established a safe and orderly environment and a positive ethos for learning. Pupils say that they feel safe in the school, and policies relating to safeguarding and special educational needs are now compliant with current statutory guidance.

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

You have recently made good use of external expertise to review provision, such as in governance. You are also working with the other Steiner academies within the region to ensure that assessments are accurate. As yet, middle leaders have had little opportunity to see outstanding practice in other schools to extend their knowledge of teaching and learning strategies.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Devon. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sue Frater
Her Majesty's Inspector