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Mrs Christine McLintock
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Dear Mrs McLintock

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sir William Ramsay School

Following my visit to your school on 15 September 2017, 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 June 2016. 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 last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- address the underachievement of some groups of pupils, for example boys and the most able pupils
- implement fully the new systems that have been developed to monitor and improve teaching, learning and assessment, and homework, so that inconsistencies in quality and effectiveness are reduced.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met you, other senior leaders, the chair and vice-chair of the governing body and a representative of the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated. I read a range of other documents, including minutes of governing body meetings, leaders' 'raising standards' files, and records of the evaluation of teaching. With subject leaders I reviewed samples of pupils' work. Together, we observed teaching and learning in a range of different classrooms. I spoke to pupils informally during lessons and at breaktime and met with a group of pupils in Years 8, 10, 12 and 13 formally. I scrutinised the register of recruitment checks made on staff joining the school.

Context

Since the last inspection, the headteacher and the chair of the governing body have resigned. The deputy headteacher took on the post of acting headteacher until you took up your post as headteacher at the start of September 2017. Several teachers left the school during the year. This resulted in the school employing some temporary supply teachers. However, you have recruited new permanent staff so that currently there is minimal supply cover necessary.

Main findings

Immediately after the last inspection, there was considerable turbulence in leadership and governance which meant that actions to improve the school were not taken quickly enough. However, from October last year, leaders and governors did begin to address the areas for improvement and the school has improved more rapidly since then. Governors brokered external support for the school, which included the temporary appointment of an executive headteacher. He supported the acting headteacher in implementing the changes needed to improve the school.

A revised action plan was put in place. This focused, necessarily, largely on formalising systems within the school. For example, more rigid structures for meetings and the monitoring of teachers' work have been put in place, and a new system for analysing pupils' progress has been introduced. This plan was a step in the right direction, as it has helped to improve consistency in the school and provided a foundation upon which to build further improvements. However, in places, the plan measures success by the completion of tasks and does not link directly enough to improvements in teaching and pupils' progress.

Since recently joining the school, you have 'hit the ground running' and have secure plans in place to, as you say, 'pull it all together'. You have swiftly got to grips quickly with what the school needs to do to improve further. Your mantra of 'every day is a day of learning' is already having a positive effect on the atmosphere in classrooms.

You have refined your new system for tracking pupils' progress so that it is now more accurate and includes more challenging, appropriate targets for pupils' achievement. Alongside this, more regular assessment is providing teachers with better information about pupils' progress and is allowing them to identify pupils who need to catch up. Pupils told me that improved assessment of their work is giving them a better understanding of how to improve. Useful work by senior leaders to improve the quality of teaching has been based on leaders' research into 'what works'. As a result, lessons are more productive and pupils say that teachers help them more. Rightly, work to reduce inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of teaching is ongoing.

Together, these initiatives are starting to improve pupils' achievement. Last year, pupils in Year 11 and Year 13 made faster progress than previously. However, leaders know that this year pupils in all years, including the most able, need to make better progress to achieve what they should. While there have been improvements to the levels of challenge in some work, pupils are not encouraged to think hard regularly enough. In addition, leaders have accurately identified that boys do not yet make enough progress; their work to understand what needs to be done to improve boys' progress is in its early stages. Leaders also recognise the need to improve the regularity and quality of homework so that it supports learning more effectively.

You have made some progress towards improving the quality of leadership and management across the school. Additional training has helped subject leaders to refine their skills and make sure that they understand the baseline expectations of their positions. Consequently, they are well-placed to focus more sharply on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that all pupils make more rapid progress than in the past. Governors have changed their practices so that they monitor leaders' work more closely. The external support they have brokered has helped the school to improve. However, while governors have a strong understanding of the improvements made to assessment systems and to leadership, they do not interrogate the progress towards improving teaching, or the impact that initiatives are having on pupils' progress, fully enough.

Leaders have successfully reduced the proportion of sixth-form students who leave courses during the year by making sure that students receive effective guidance to select courses which match their interests and ambitions more precisely. Students report that they enjoy their time in the sixth form and value the advice they receive as it helps them to think more clearly about future qualifications and careers. Students now undertake regular, meaningful work experience. There is a better working environment in the sixth form and students' work ethic has improved. Students' progress in vocational courses improved dramatically this year. However, in some academic subjects, progress stalled. You have taken swift action to prevent this happening in the future by removing options that have been unsuccessful in the past and introducing a post-16 collaboration with a local school. You have made sure that the subjects offered by each school 'play to their strengths'.

External support

Governors have successfully brokered additional support for the school. Last year, in addition to employing a temporary executive headteacher, the school received support from St Clement Danes Teaching School, a monitoring officer from the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, and Holmer Green Senior School. This support has been crucial in helping senior and middle leaders to fine-tune their understanding of their roles. They have seen the benefits of learning in collaboration with local professionals.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Old
Her Majesty's Inspector