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Val Wigham
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Dear Ms Wigham

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Studio West

Following my visit to your school on 18 December 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 January 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the Kenton Trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- address any variation in the quality of teaching and learning between different subjects so that pupils' progress is consistently strong
- ensure that teaching consistently challenges the most able pupils so that they attain their full potential
- provide additional support for sixth-form students following academic or vocational pathways who have fallen behind their target grades.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the principal, deputy principal, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Kenton Trust, and the chair of the governing body and another governor. I also met with a group of pupils and looked at some of their work in different subjects. I visited a number of lessons with the deputy principal and spoke to pupils about their learning and progress. I evaluated the school's plans for improvement and scrutinised a number of other documents, including the record of vetting checks on staff, assessment and attendance information, records of checks on the quality of teaching, performance management information and minutes of governing body meetings.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the CEO of the Kenton Trust has retired and new arrangements for the CEO role are in place. The chair of the Studio West governing body has stepped down and a new chair has been appointed. The school has changed its age range and now admits pupils from age eleven. The school admitted its first cohort of Year 7 pupils in September and is oversubscribed for admissions into Year 7 for next September. The number on roll has risen to 217. Several teachers have left the school and new appointments have been made. Studio West remains a member of the Kenton multi-academy trust, although there are plans in place for the schools in the Kenton Trust, including Studio West, to become part of another multi-academy trust. These plans remain subject to Department for Education approval.

Main findings

Leaders continue to work tirelessly to improve the school. Immediately after the last inspection, they streamlined their improvement planning processes. The principal accepted the school's plans for improvement had not been tight enough. The current school improvement plan sets out clearly when actions will take place and includes success criteria which governors are using to determine whether actions are being effective. Leaders update the plan each half-term and rate the effect their actions have had on improving the school. Their ratings are checked and validated by the CEO. Governors review the information in the plan at each of their meetings. They now systematically check the most important indicators of the school's performance and, as a result, know where to focus their challenge.

The school's self-evaluation, criticised for being overly generous at the time of the last inspection, has been reviewed. Buoyed by considerably better Year 11 examination outcomes last year, and by the improvements made to teaching, leaders now evaluate the school's performance to be good. Leaders and governors are in no way complacent, however, as they know the standard of attainment of each cohort of pupils varies considerably. They continue to focus on addressing

inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and know efforts need to be sustained so that pupils make consistently good progress.

Outcomes for pupils at the end of key stage 4 in 2017 were much better than in the previous year. Pupils made better progress in most subjects, although some variability between subjects remained. Disadvantaged pupils made better progress than other pupils nationally. Pupils made much stronger progress in mathematics, and, as a result, over three quarters of pupils attained a standard GCSE pass in both English and mathematics. Pupils who were low or middle attainers at the end of primary school made strong progress, but the most able pupils made less progress than they should. The school's own assessment information indicates that pupils currently in the school are making secure progress. Average levels of attainment, however, are variable across year groups and subject to volatility because of the high level of in-year admissions from other schools. Last year, very few students on 16 to 19 study programmes were entered for examinations. Students currently in Year 12 and Year 13 are making less secure progress and some have fallen behind their target grades on both academic and vocational courses. Leaders know that the progress being made by students currently in the sixth form requires improvement.

Since the last inspection, leaders have taken the strategic decision to change the school age range and now accept pupils from Year 7 onwards. Currently, the school has 88 pupils in Year 7 and is oversubscribed with applications for next year. Numbers in other year groups remain small and subject to change, as a relatively high number of pupils join the school during the year because they choose to make a fresh start or are at risk of exclusion from other schools. Pupils in Year 7 have made a positive start. A new assessment system has been developed which pupils understand and find motivating. Their attendance is high and no pupil in the year group has decided to change school. Parents who responded to Parent View are positive about the quality of education being provided.

The performance of teachers is being managed rigorously. Thorough checks are made on the quality of teaching and teachers are held to account for the progress their pupils make. Since the last inspection, a few teachers have left the school and new teachers have been recruited. Checks made by leaders indicate that these new teachers are having a positive impact and have accelerated the progress of their classes. For example, assessment information shows that pupils are making much better progress in product design. Leaders provide frequent training and professional development opportunities and have employed a consultant to support their work to improve the standard of teaching. Some variability remains, but leaders know exactly where they need to focus their attention. My scrutiny of pupils' books showed me that pupils take pride in their work and that standards of handwriting and presentation are generally good.

A new chair of the governing body has been appointed and a number of new governors with suitable skills and backgrounds have been recruited. Governors now

systematically check the school's progress across a well-selected range of performance measures. Governors also make regular visits to check that the school's quality assurance arrangements are sufficiently tight. The records of governing body meetings show that governors increasingly ask searching questions to check whether the quality of teaching, and the progress pupils make, are good enough.

External support

The current CEO of the Kenton Trust is providing effective oversight and scrutiny of the school's performance. His astute monitoring and evaluation are particularly useful to leaders, whose time is limited by their extensive teaching commitments.

The external reviews of governance and of the school's use of the pupil premium have both been completed. Following the external review, the chair of the governing body successfully recruited new governors with particular skills in financial management and with business experience. This has further strengthened the capacity of governors to improve the school. Governors have also sharpened the strategic checks they make on the use of additional funding. The pupil premium review has further raised the importance of the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The most recent tracking data indicates there is little difference between the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and others in the school. However, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in different year groups is variable when compared to that of other pupils nationally.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the Kenton Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector