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Paula Lawson
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Dear Mrs Lawson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Radcliffe School

Following my visit to your school on 25 October 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that pupils acquire the subject-specific knowledge and skills that they need to complete the tasks that teachers set them to a high standard, especially in humanities and science.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held separately with the headteacher and other senior leaders, the chair of the governing body, accompanied by two other governors, a group of pupils, a group of subject leaders, the senior leader responsible for overseeing pupil premium funding, the designated and deputy

designated safeguarding leaders, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plans were evaluated. Short visits were made to classes, accompanied by senior leaders. Information relating to checks made on staff when they are appointed was examined, and a sample of pupils' work was scrutinised.

Context

Since the last inspection, a number of changes have been made to the senior leadership team. A new headteacher has been appointed, and there is now one deputy headteacher and four assistant headteachers.

Main findings

Since your appointment as headteacher, you have made a number of carefully considered and substantial changes that have moved the school forward. You are resolute in your determination to improve the school. You are ensuring that any improvements are built on firm foundations. You have altered the composition of the senior leadership team and redefined some senior leaders' roles. As a result, the senior leadership team is leaner and sharper, and roles are closely aligned to the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection. You have also created a number of new leadership posts, mainly attached to subjects, which are focused on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, including attendance. Your work with disadvantaged pupils is complex and multifaceted and you recognise that there is some way to go before all aspects are equally successful. However, you are now carefully monitoring the impact of all new approaches, including those directed at supporting disadvantaged pupils. You have wisely focused on improving teaching in science and humanities. A senior leader now oversees the science department. There is also more work required to make the curriculum strong in both these subject areas. The additional changes proposed over the coming months are likely to lead to further improvements in these subject areas.

You have started to work on strengthening the way pupils review and prioritise their own learning. In some classes, pupils are well supported in this. The work that pupils do shows that they are making progress as a result of their well-informed decisions about how best to embed their newly learned knowledge and skills. In German classes, for instance, this approach is working well. In some history classes, however, new approaches are not working as well, because pupils do not know enough and cannot remember enough to make well-informed choices about how to move their learning on. For example, in one history class, pupils did not have enough subject knowledge about British abolitionists, who opposed slavery in the 18th century. As a result, pupils were not able to do the tasks they had been set to a high standard. In another class, although pupils were stimulated by learning about the American civil rights movement, their answers to the teachers' questions showed that there were gaps in their subject knowledge and understanding.

In some science classes, where teachers have well-developed subject knowledge, teaching is impressive. You are aware that in several science classes teachers have limited subject knowledge and that, consequently, teaching in these classes is not effective. In classes where practice in teaching is weak, pupils' behaviour is not as good as it is elsewhere in the school. You have strong plans in place to improve this, as seen in the recruitment of two new specialist science teachers who will join the department after Christmas 2018.

You have developed the capabilities of subject leaders, and they are now much more confident in their roles. They work closely with the teaching staff in the departments they manage to ensure that they have the necessary subject knowledge and skills to teach the GCSE specifications. Subject leaders also now work alongside senior leaders to monitor and evaluate how well new approaches are working. Their checks helpfully include observations of teaching and learning as well as scrutiny of pupils' work. Subject leaders' checks are sensibly based on ensuring that new approaches are consistent and are leading to better progress.

The new sixth-form leader has a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the provision. Information from tracking suggests that students' progress is improving, especially in some science subjects, such as biology. However, progress in vocational subjects is not yet consistently strong, because sometimes teachers' expectations of what students can do and can achieve are not high enough. You and your sixth-form leader recognise that although progress is generally strong, students' overall attainment needs to be raised. You have well-considered plans in place to boost attainment in the sixth form, for example by ensuring that teachers have higher expectations of their students.

You have developed very detailed improvement plans aimed at strengthening the impact of additional pupil premium funding on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. With this goal in mind, you have set up a number of bespoke strategies, called 'projects', focused on disadvantaged pupils. A designated leader systematically and regularly checks the impact that these 'projects' are having. If the impact is not as anticipated, changes are swiftly made. Last year, 'projects' aimed at reducing persistent absence for disadvantaged pupils were not as effective as you had hoped. However, other 'projects' were effective, and early performance information shows that the difference between the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in your school diminished in 2018. However, early information shows that the progress that all pupils make is not yet strong enough, most notably in science and history.

During the inspection, pupils spoke positively about some of the extra opportunities that they have been offered by the school. A number said that they had benefited from additional support which had helped them with their learning and, on occasion, with managing their own behaviour. Pupils remarked on how tolerant the school is, showed a strong awareness of issues relating to equalities and said that they felt safe. Pupils and staff also commented on the improved atmosphere in

school and how relationships between staff and pupils have improved. You and your leaders work closely with staff supporting them in managing pupils' behaviour more appropriately.

Governance is now stronger and is supporting the school well in its journey to being good. Very soon after the previous inspection, governors made some carefully considered changes to how they worked. Governors astutely decided to delay the review of governance, until after these planned improvements had been made, in order to receive an external view of how well they had worked. The subsequent review of governance indicated that several aspects of governance had improved. In particular, changes to the committee structure mean that actions aimed at improving the school are now scrutinised at full governing body meetings. As a result, senior leaders are subjected to greater levels of challenge.

External support

You have benefited from the external reviews of governance and the pupil premium that have been undertaken. Leaders and governors have engaged well with review processes and have taken all the recommendations on board. A local authority school improvement partner works closely with the school and also sits on the 'targeted improvement board', which is convened and overseen by the local authority. The board meets regularly in order to hold leaders to account for the impact that changes are having. The process of preparing for meetings of this improvement board ties in well with the school's own quality-assurance processes. This is because senior leaders are required to provide evidence that the changes they have made are having a positive effect on pupils' learning and outcomes.

The school has sensibly joined national organisations that work alongside the school to enhance the profile of, and opportunities for learning in, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In addition, some subject leaders have benefited from training that has been provided externally.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector