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Miss Joanne Kiernan
Highfield School
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Dear Miss Kiernan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Highfield School

Following my visit to your school on 12 May 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 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- make sure that safeguarding arrangements, including the record of checks on the suitability of staff to work in the school, comply with the most recent statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE)
- strengthen leadership, management and governance, so that the areas for improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection are tackled with greater urgency and robustness
- commission the high-quality external support needed to secure rapid improvement in the quality of education at Highfield School.

Evidence

During the inspection, I had meetings with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, two representatives of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also had a discussion with the school's recently appointed improvement partner. I visited lessons with a senior leader, talked to pupils and looked at the work in their books. I evaluated the school's action plan and looked at a range of documents relating to self-evaluation, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and the school's safeguarding arrangements.

Context

Since the last inspection, a new headteacher and deputy headteacher have been appointed to the school's senior leadership team. Both took up their posts at the start of the summer term 2017. In addition, three new governors have joined the school's governing body and a new chair and vice-chair of governors have been appointed.

Main findings

Senior leaders, governors and the local authority have not focused on the core issues that need tackling at Highfield School. Their actions have lacked the required urgency and rigour and, as a result, important aspects of the school's work remain unacceptably variable.

The recently appointed headteacher has quickly worked out what needs to be done to get the school back on track. Senior leaders have developed an action plan that is sharply focused on strengthening leadership and management, developing the curriculum, and improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Senior leaders have developed and implemented new systems for monitoring key areas of the school's work. They are systematically checking whether their actions are making the much-needed difference to teachers' practice and pupils' learning and progress. Crucially, however, the actions taken by senior leaders in the 15 months since the school's last section 5 inspection have had too little impact on the areas of the school's work which require improvement.

The recently appointed chair of the governing body is realistic about what needs to be done to strengthen the school's governance. This includes making sure that all governors have the knowledge and skills needed to contribute effectively to the school's leadership and management. Over time, governors have not provided the impetus, urgency and robust challenge needed to secure rapid improvement at Highfield School.

Senior leaders know that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not improving quickly enough. There is too much variability and some weak practice remains. Some teachers do not set work which is sufficiently challenging or make sure that pupils have secured their knowledge, skills and understanding before they move on to new work. Similarly, some teachers do not explain ideas and concepts well, or question pupils to develop and deepen their understanding. Some teachers, however, are improving their practice as a result of the effective training and support they are now receiving. Importantly, teaching assistants have a more clearly defined role in lessons and are supporting pupils increasingly well. In part, this is because they are developing the subject knowledge they need to help pupils take the next steps in their learning.

The actions taken to improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare have also lacked the necessary urgency and decisiveness. Systems for recording and following up behaviour incidents focus too much on the frequency and nature of pupils' behaviour and not enough on trying to work out the underlying causes. The school's approach to helping pupils learn how to manage their behaviour remains ineffective. Equally, senior leaders and governors do not have robust oversight of important aspects of pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, including the school's safeguarding arrangements. The record of checks on the suitability of staff to work in the school does not meet DfE requirements, and the school's current safeguarding policy does not comply with the most recent statutory guidance from the DfE.

In contrast, the post-16 manager has systematically tackled the weaker aspects of the school's 16 to 19 study programmes since the last inspection. The post-16 curriculum has a strong focus on preparing students for adulthood and the post-16 manager has developed and implemented a range of systems that are supporting improvement. Students' readiness for employment and independent living, and their knowledge and understanding of how to maintain good health, are assessed and tracked in an increasingly systematic way. As a result, gaps in their knowledge and skills are identified more quickly and addressed more effectively.

External support

The local authority has not provided the necessary support and challenge for Highfield School. Local authority leaders have not done enough to assure themselves that they have an accurate view of the school's effectiveness. As a result, their assessment of the capacity of senior leaders and governors to tackle the areas requiring improvement has been overgenerous. Greater urgency and more committed and intensive action are now required.

Senior leaders and governors, with the support of the local authority, will be required to provide a half-termly written report to Ofsted summarising the actions taken to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the school's last section 5 inspection, the further actions specified in this letter, and an evaluation of the impact of these actions on the quality of education and outcomes for pupils at Highfield School.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Whittaker
Her Majesty's Inspector