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Mr D Millne
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Dear Mr Millne

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Beacon Hill Community School

Following my visit to the school on 22 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 September 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- make sure all the governors have access to, and are trained in how to interpret, the changed national assessment information that compares the school to other schools nationally
- enable the governing body to evaluate its impact and to evaluate what further skills governors need to carry out their statutory duties
- revise the school's improvement plans so they tie in more closely to the systems for checking the quality of teaching.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held a meeting with a representative of the local authority and a meeting with three members of the governing body. To discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher and conducted a brief learning walk with you around the school. I read through the school's action plan and a number of other documents.

Main findings

Two new governors have joined the governing body. The committees and the frequency of meetings have been reorganised, which means that the governing body meets more often and is more likely to have enough representatives at each meeting to make decisions. There is greater and more detailed oversight of the school's work and a greater level of challenge to staff, which is now being noted in minutes of meetings. Governors have an overview of current pupils' progress and attainment. The way in which pupils' attainment and progress is recorded for all schools nationally is changing. Governors have not received training in the new layout of Ofsted's national assessment information. This means they are not in a position to be able to interpret the school's validated data or compare pupils' outcomes with other schools nationally. The governing body is reflective and has a clear vision for the school's ethos, culture and progress. There is no system at present for governors to evaluate their own impact or to undertake a regular audit of governors' skills, knowledge and understanding. As a result, it is unclear what attributes are needed to fill any vacancy in the governing body.

The leaders' plan for improvement have been effective. Since the previous inspection leaders at all levels have successfully raised the profile and importance of good attendance with pupils and their families. Governors and leaders meet with parents in attendance panels to discuss ways of supporting pupils to come to school more frequently. There is an improved system to check on any pupil absence. On occasions this means relentlessly calling parents until there is a reasonable explanation for their child's absence or asking parents for proof of a medical appointment to explain any time off. The school is also enforcing penalty fines for parents who, despite staff's support, still do not make sure their children attend school. These and other measures, such as rewards for pupils, have raised attendance since September. The number of pupils persistently absent has reduced.

Pupils' move from primary to secondary school has started to improve. Leaders at all levels have worked with colleagues in primary schools to enable the transition to be smoother and more effective. Senior leaders talk frequently to headteachers and visit the primary schools, for example to take assembly. More-able pupils in Years 5 and 6 are invited to the secondary school to be challenged with more complex work and activities. The primary schools use Beacon Hill's facilities such as their gymnasium and grounds for physical education, sports or dramatic performances.

Teachers from Beacon Hill have met with their colleagues in primary to agree on how to assess pupils' abilities in English. As a result of this work, teachers at Beacon Hill have increased their knowledge and understanding of what pupils at primary can produce. There are further initiatives in place for later this year which may also help to increase teachers' expectations of Year 7 pupils.

Leaders meet half-termly to discuss the progress, attendance and well-being of pupils who are known to be disadvantaged (because they are eligible for free school meals or because they are looked after children). These discussions lead to focused teaching or additional provision based on individual pupils' needs. Leaders know their pupils and their families very well and identify and successfully tackle any barriers they have to making progress. As a result, there are signs that this group, particularly those without special educational needs, are making accelerated progress.

Leaders' frequent checks on teaching and learning are followed up in staff meetings and also in subsequent observations or scrutiny of pupils' work. The school's improvement plan, because it is set annually, is not able to reflect quickly enough any areas for development that arise out of leaders' monitoring. The school should therefore consider changing its system of improvement planning so that leaders can create actions more quickly to tackle any areas for development that are uncovered.

External support

The local authority has reduced its support for the school because it is making good progress. There are strategic improvement meetings held termly in which leaders and governors meet to discuss the improvements that have been made. Since the previous inspection, the authority has supported the governing body and helped it to restructure and reorganise. It has helped to give guidance to the school about improving teaching and learning and it has provided greater support from the attendance officer. In addition, the local authority has brokered specialist support from Keswick School and West Lakes Academy. Solway School conducted a review of the provision for disadvantaged pupils via the Area Consortium Group.

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

Yours sincerely

Allan Torr
Her Majesty's Inspector