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Dr Chris Ingate
Birchwood High School
Parsonage Lane
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Dear Dr Ingate

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birchwood High School

Following my visit to your school on 23 May 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 last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- continue to remove the barriers that prevent disadvantaged pupils from making good progress in order to raise their achievement and ensure that they have every opportunity to achieve equally as well as others.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, your senior leaders, three members of the local governing body and a group of Year 10 pupils to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I visited a range of subjects with you or your senior leaders, enabling me to see pupils at work and to discuss with them their learning over time. I also reviewed a range of school documentation, including your self-evaluation and improvement plan.

Context

Since the last inspection, 19 new teachers have joined the school, four of whom are newly qualified. A full-time deputy principal was appointed in September 2017. The leaders of the English, mathematics and science faculties at the time of the previous inspection remain in place.

Main findings

Your evaluation of the school's effectiveness is both honest and evaluative, and provides you with a useful blueprint for your improvement plan. Throughout the inspection, you and your senior leaders were candid about the actions you have taken and were able to talk coherently about those that have worked well and some that have been less successful. You could all identify the areas where the full impact of your actions is yet to be seen and are realistic about the timeframe for further improvement. You admit that in the past some things have not been done as well as they could. Reassuringly, you now have clear plans in place to address all of the issues identified in the previous report and have tangible evidence of significant improvements across most areas.

You and your senior leaders have strengthened your monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment. This is now more effective. More staff are involved in monitoring lessons, and teachers are expected to reflect upon and develop their practice. Increasingly, staff are supported to broaden their expertise by attending national and in-house training, alongside gaining wider professional qualifications. Recent opportunities have involved staff in using information on pupils' progress effectively and ensuring that appropriate challenge is provided for all pupils, but particularly those who are most able in lessons. Further training, including coaching tailored to meet the specific needs of teachers, is enabling some of them to progress to your 'getting to great' scheme. The combination of training and greater scrutiny of teaching and learning is encouraging all staff to improve their practice and raise standards across the curriculum.

In 2017, pupils' progress increased, and significant improvements were seen across a number of areas, including science. In mathematics and science, pupils made above-average progress. Your information on current pupils shows that you have built on the improvements, and pupils across groups, including disadvantaged pupils, now make better progress. You track pupils' progress closely, and the accuracy of last year's forecasts for pupils working at the expected levels gives you and your governors confidence in your predictions for current pupils. You know where improvements are less marked, and are aware of the need to monitor these areas closely. Governors are now more involved and informed about the progress made by different groups of pupils. The new governor responsible for assessment information and subject link governors provide the governing body with a useful insight into the progress made by pupils at both subject and group level. Providing governors with the progress information a week before meetings enables them to scrutinise

information more closely, look in more detail at pupils' progress over time and ask those searching questions to challenge you and your senior leaders more effectively.

You acknowledge that disadvantaged pupils still do not progress as well as others do in some areas, and that this presents a significant barrier to becoming a good school. Rightly, improving this has been a major focus of your work. You realise the link between academic success and improved life chances, and you have won the 'hearts and minds' of staff. Everyone is aware of the moral imperative to improve the progress that all groups of pupils make, but particularly disadvantaged pupils. Staff routinely use the class information sheet, highlighting pupils' different needs, to ensure that activities are carefully matched to pupils' abilities. Your plans are built around consistent, high-quality teaching, alongside early identification of any barriers to pupils' learning, targeted support, an appropriate curriculum and social and emotional support. You are providing better support to enable disadvantaged pupils to overcome their difficulties. You know that many struggle with reading and writing, and this has been a key focus. Your support helps many of these pupils to make better progress across all subjects. Our learning walks confirmed the improvements seen in their progress over time, although you rightly identify that inconsistencies still remain. This is particularly noticeable in the older year groups, where some significant gaps in their learning remain.

By growing the expertise of your own staff, you are able to support pupils to acquire the skills to become effective learners, attend well and be able to feel good about themselves. The impact of this additional help is clearly evident. Pupils grow their self-esteem, are helped to deal with any issues they have and build greater resilience. The approaches you use to help some long-term absentees access education and obtain nationally recognised qualifications ensure that no pupil is forgotten. As part of your raising aspiration programme, it was wonderful to hear from two pupils from the 'brilliant club' how their recent graduation at university has reinforced their ambition to study in higher education when they leave. To help more pupils achieve more highly, you have adapted your broad and balanced curriculum to make it even more aspirational.

You, your senior leaders and your governors are rightly proud of the improvements that have been made to date. You know that you need to ensure that disadvantaged pupils achieve equally as well as others, and to do this you need to remove the few inconsistencies in the quality of teaching that still remain.

External support

The academy sought additional support from external consultants, and this has been useful in steering its improvement. The guidance, support and increased accountability adds rigour to the school's monitoring procedures and improvement planning.

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

Yours sincerely

John Randall
Her Majesty's Inspector