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Mrs Carole Fisher
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Dear Mrs Fisher

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Wardle Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 20 March 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 February 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

The academy should take further action to:

- more quickly identify those pupils who have already met or exceeded their academic targets, celebrate their achievements and set new targets
- revise the school's action plans so that they are succinct and have clearly defined deadlines.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders, middle leaders, the chair and two other members of the governing body and representatives of the trust to discuss the school's actions. Together, we visited a number of classrooms. I spoke by telephone to an independent consultant who works with the school. I met with a group of pupils, who shared their books with

me and talked about their learning. I also looked at a range of documentation, including your action plans, your own self-evaluation as well as external evaluations of the school's work.

Context

Since the inspection, you have appointed eight new governors to the local governing board, following a number of resignations. Also, a new chair and vice-chair of the governing body have been appointed. You have restructured the senior leadership team, reducing the number of assistant headteachers. A new deputy headteacher joined the school in September 2016. Eleven members of staff have left the school since the inspection.

Main findings

In the few weeks you had been in post prior to the inspection, you had identified many of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. You had already put actions in place to address some of the areas of underperformance. Following the inspection, you prioritised a smaller number of key actions, making sure that you gave each of these tasks the time and resources needed. For every action, you thoroughly evaluate the impact and reassure yourself that the new way of working is embedded before moving on. This well-considered approach is paying dividends, as the actions you have taken over the past year have made a positive difference to the school's performance.

By their own admission, staff, governors and leaders were disappointed by the outcomes of the inspection. However, everyone agrees that the school has come on in 'leaps and bounds' in the past 12 months. The inspector asked you to arrange for an external review of governance. This review was a catalyst for change. A number of governors resigned. The new governors appointed have transformed the local governing body into a dynamic, strategic leadership team who are highly ambitious for the school. The local governing body have been greatly helped by the decision of the trust to separate the roles from those of the board of trustees. The local governing body are able to give teaching, learning and pupil performance their full attention now. The new chair provides strong leadership, making sure that her team fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

You have made sure that there are clear lines of accountability across the school now. Every member of your senior leadership team is responsible for the performance of a department or team within school. You insist that these leaders share the performance management targets of the heads of their link departments. These link senior leaders work closely with the staff in these departments to secure the rapid improvements required to improve pupils' outcomes. Governors are holding both the link senior leaders and heads of department to account through their frequent subject review meetings. Their incisive questions are making sure that the school's action plans are on track.

You have worked hard to improve pupils' behaviour. You recognise that helping pupils to develop good learning habits will help them make better progress. At the start of this academic year, you launched 'Nu-Hope' for Years 7 and 8. You set out the six learning habits for pupils, which you and your staff insist on, day in and day out. The high expectations you have for pupils now have transformed pupils' behaviour both in lessons and around school. You intend to extend this approach to Year 9 after Easter. Across the school, behaviour has greatly improved. Lessons generally proceed without interruption. Pupils' behaviour around school is calm and orderly. The number of fixed-term exclusions has reduced for all groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

You have made sure that improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs are among the school's top priorities. Teachers are in no doubt about the importance of improving the performance of these pupils. You insisted that disadvantaged pupils' work is marked first and they receive more detailed feedback to help them improve their work. You asked teachers to explain their rationale for where these pupils were sat in class. As for everyone, you have set aspirational 'flight paths', making sure that these pupils make similar progress to other pupils. You now hold six-weekly attendance panels for any pupils whose attendance is below 90%. Pupils sit down with their heads of year and the pastoral team to identify reasons for their poor attendance and agree actions. Attendance has improved, not only for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, but for the whole school.

A relentless focus on teaching and learning is helping you to eradicate weak practice across the school. Pupils talked very positively about the 'strong starts' you have introduced. Staff are impressed with how quickly pupils settle to learning now when they come into class. Pupils have noticed that teachers are better prepared for lessons so that time is not wasted. Teachers find out what pupils already know before they plan a new topic. Pupils appreciate the 'green pen tasks' and 'go green weeks' when teachers help them 'plug gaps' in their learning, making sure that no one falls behind. Teachers are making better use of questioning to encourage engagement, focus thinking, challenge misconceptions and deepen understanding. Pupils value the willingness of their teachers to give time outside lessons to provide pupils with extra support when needed. Older pupils talked to me about how some teachers are providing helpful homework tasks which help pupils consolidate their learning.

Together, you, senior leaders and governors make sure that nothing is left to chance. You have put in place robust systems and procedures to keep your plans on course. Your carefully planned monitoring programme makes sure that you keep a close eye on all aspects of school improvement. You recognise that, although your current action plans accurately identify the most pressing issues, they are unwieldy. You understand that for them to be understood and acted on by everyone, they must be more succinct and have specific deadlines for the completion of actions.

This will help governors and yourself to quickly pick up on any slippage.

Pupils know their targets. They understand what they need to do to meet these targets. However, some of your pupils have already met or exceeded their end of year targets. We talked about the importance of celebrating these achievements and then setting new targets so that these pupils capitalise on their success.

External support

You have brokered support from three local schools judged to be outstanding by Ofsted at their most recent inspections. You have secured external funding for a senior leader from Middleton Technology College to support the school one day per week. In addition, you have appointed an external consultant who conducts a termly quality assurance visit to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's work. Both senior leaders and staff told me of the positive difference the advice and guidance from these schools and staff is making to teaching and learning, as well as to pupils' behaviour. I know that you personally have found the informal mentoring provided by the headteachers of these schools very beneficial.

Following the inspection, your governors swiftly commissioned an external review of governance. This review provided the catalyst for significant improvements in the school's governance arrangements. You also made sure that an external review of the use of the pupil premium was sought soon after the inspection. You have made good use of the findings to develop the school's strategy to ensure that these pupils overcome their barriers to learning and catch up quickly with their peers.

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

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland
Her Majesty's Inspector