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Mr Sam Strickland
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Dear Mr Strickland

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Duston School

Following my visit to your school on 25 April 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 November 2016. 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:

- complete the records kept about incidents of bullying thoroughly so that leaders can be certain that all reported incidents have been dealt with decisively
- tackle quickly and effectively any remaining incidents of poor behaviour experienced by pupils
- ensure that the leaders responsible for supporting pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities quickly gain a clear overview of how well teaching across the school meets the needs of the pupils they support so that they can take action where improvements are needed
- ensure that teachers check consistently that all pupils have completed the work set and take action to support and challenge pupils whose work is unfinished.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders and members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Together, we observed learning in a range of subjects, including in science and modern foreign languages. I spoke with pupils in lessons and held formal meetings with pupils in Years 7, 8 and 10. I considered a range of documentary evidence, including the school's action plans, information about pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour and the school's records of bullying incidents. I did not look at the early years, primary phase or the sixth form during the monitoring inspection.

Context

You joined the school as headteacher at the beginning of the summer term 2017. At the time of this monitoring inspection you had been in post for five days. Two assistant directors of year were appointed in January 2017, with the result that all directors of year are now supported by an assistant. A lead practitioner for behaviour was appointed in January 2017.

Main findings

The senior leaders already in post when you joined the school have made a promising start in tackling the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. With support and scrutiny from the governing body, they have formulated action plans in each of the key areas for improvement that set out how and when the weaknesses will be tackled. The plans benefit from clear success criteria. These enable leaders and governors to check regularly whether their actions are proving to be effective.

Actions to secure greater consistency in the quality of teaching are beginning to make a difference, including in science, where teaching has been weak. In the science lessons we visited, pupils in Years 10 and 11 were learning well and were clearly motivated to improve their scores in the practice examination questions they were tackling. All of the many pupils I spoke with in these lessons reported that science has improved considerably this year and that the quality of teaching is much better than they have experienced in the past. The regular assessments carried out by staff indicate that pupils are making better progress in science than in the past. You and other members of the senior team judge that, although results in science are likely to improve this year, they will still not be as good as they should be. This is because of the long legacy of weaker teaching older pupils have received in the past.

Leaders know where teaching is strong and where it needs to improve. They have taken effective action to tackle the weakest teaching. Senior staff have revised the school's marking and feedback policy to meet their aim that pupils benefit more

from their teachers' advice and written comments. Our scrutiny of pupils' work during visits to lessons showed that teachers are generally complying with the school's expectations, but their feedback is not always as precise and helpful as senior leaders would wish to see. While most pupils produce good-quality work, in some of the classes a few books included examples of incomplete work that had not been challenged or noted by the teachers. Not all teachers insist on high standards of presentation in pupils' work. Specialist teaching for pupils in Year 7 who joined the school in September 2016 without having achieved the expected standards in English and/or mathematics has meant that many of these pupils are catching up with their peers.

Senior leaders are strengthening their checks on pupils' progress by holding subject leaders more effectively to account than before. Leaders now probe more carefully the information they are given about pupils' progress to check that it is accurate. They rightly challenge subject leaders about the progress different groups of pupils are making, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils. Staff are expected to identify the barriers to learning faced by disadvantaged pupils and devise action plans to ensure that they are overcome.

The special educational needs coordinator and his assistant provide support through additional teaching for pupils who need extra help to increase their confidence and raise their achievement. They provide training for staff and regular updates about individual pupils, including through the good-quality 'pupil passports' they issue. They are also beginning to visit lessons more regularly to assess how well pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are being challenged and supported in different subjects. This aspect of their work is at an early stage, however. As a result, their understanding of how well the needs of this group of pupils are being met across subjects is not strong enough. This limits their effectiveness in ensuring that pupils are receiving the support they need.

Senior leaders have brought about improvements to the school's systems for managing pupils' behaviour. They have also strengthened the school's focus on rewarding pupils, for example by raising the profile of 'respect points' and other rewards. The school's analysis of behaviour is more detailed than before and enables leaders to track pupils' attitudes to learning over time to see if they are improving. Records show that the number of recorded behaviour incidents has reduced. In the lessons we visited, the pupils behaved well. Nevertheless, some of the pupils I met reported that behaviour is still not always good enough. Some commented that teachers do not implement the revised behaviour policy consistently or fairly.

All of the pupils I met said that they feel safe at school. They are aware of the school's improved arrangements to enable them to report bullying. The pupils I spoke with who had experienced bullying said that they were satisfied it had been dealt with effectively. The school's strategies to support victims of bullying are undermined, however, by inconsistencies in record-keeping. On occasion, for

example, incidents of bullying had been signed off as closed without the necessary records being completed properly.

Leaders' work to raise pupils' attendance has resulted in continued improvement to pupils' attendance. The attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities has increased. Despite the school's extensive efforts, however, the continued low attendance of a small proportion of pupils means that the attendance of disadvantaged pupils remains lower than for other pupils in the school and nationally.

Governors have a realistic view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and fully accept that the school requires improvement in order to be good. The governing body (The Duston Education Trust) provides good oversight of the actions taken by senior leaders to improve the school to check that they are working. The governing body's actions in the past show that governors are not afraid to challenge senior leaders where they are dissatisfied with the effectiveness of their work.

External support

The school has benefited from the support and challenge provided by an external consultant commissioned by the trust to assess the effectiveness of its work. Reports from the consultant show that this is a useful and robust mechanism in highlighting the school's remaining weaknesses.

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

Yours sincerely

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector