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Dear Ms Watts

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Acle Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 21 June 2019, 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection in May 2018.

This monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school received an overall effectiveness judgement of requires improvement at its last inspection.

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

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and your team of senior leaders, the coordinator of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SENCo), a group of Year 10 pupils, three members of the local governing body and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Wensum Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. You shared a range of documents with me to show recent developments and the impact of the actions taken by leaders to improve the school. Together with senior leaders we visited a range of lessons to observe pupils at work.

Context

Since the last inspection, several staffing changes have taken place in science and

humanities. Currently there is one part-time vacancy in science. However, the school is fully staffed for next term. Progress tutors in key stages 3 and 4 and the SENCo are now part of the school's extended leadership team. A new attendance officer was appointed this year. The numbers of pupils joining the school continues to rise.

Main findings

You and your leadership team are demonstrating that jointly you have the capacity to tackle the weaknesses identified at the last inspection and secure long-term improvements. Detailed development plans are used effectively by you and your leadership team to gauge the rate of progress being made in improving the school. You feel that new appointments have ensured that you have 'the right people in the right posts' to enable the school to improve further and that there are no significant barriers preventing the school from being judged good at its next inspection. The school's small size and staffing changes mean that leaders and some staff have taken more responsibility for making improvements. Finances are tightly managed and you value the support of the trust in helping you to do this.

Your own monitoring shows that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving. New appointments have been made to strengthen teaching. Tough decisions have been made when a small minority of staff have been unable to meet your raised expectations of them. Your observations have identified what teachers do well and what needs improving. This has been shared with staff to help them understand the next steps to take to improve their effectiveness. Increasingly, middle leaders are involved in monitoring teaching and evaluating the impact it has on pupils' learning. This is providing you with a clearer overview of the school's work and is building further capacity within school to lead improvements.

Your monitoring records show that regular training and professional development of staff are leading to improvement. Teaching is now better than it was at the time of the last inspection. Our joint observations confirmed that teachers have high expectations of how pupils should conduct themselves in lessons and that they manage their behaviour effectively. Most teachers use probing questions to confirm that pupils know what they are doing and to engage them in discussion. In lessons where pupils are asked to write their responses on personal whiteboards, it is clear that all of them fully understand.

There are signs that teachers are planning more opportunities to promote pupils' literacy skills. For example, pupils are asked to read aloud in class. Most of them are eager to do this. However, when pupils struggle with unfamiliar words, some staff do not give them enough time to have a go at breaking them down phonetically to read them.

Staff use the school's 'think, pair, share' approach effectively to get pupils thinking, talking together and sharing their ideas. Interactive whiteboards and video clips are

used well to stimulate discussion and develop pupils' wider vocabulary. We observed good examples in English of teachers developing pupils' descriptive language verbally and in their writing. Technical and complex language was broken down and explored in detail to ensure that pupils develop a full understanding. Teachers also made good reference to GCSE examination requirements to remind pupils of the writing techniques they need to apply to answer questions fully.

Pupils' books show that they have regular opportunities to write at length in English. Detailed, systematic use of assessment and feedback help them to develop their writing. This is much less evident in other subjects. Too many subjects are over-reliant on the use of worksheets requiring basic, short responses from pupils. This does not help them to develop their extended writing skills. Pupils with lower academic starting points are not given enough support to develop their handwriting. Their books show little evidence of guidance to help them set out their work coherently with clear sentences and paragraphs. Good-quality feedback is provided in line with the school's chosen assessment and policy. However, basic grammatical errors are not consistently brought to pupils' attention.

Teachers are well organised and use their detailed subject knowledge to plan learning. Seating plans show that they are aware of the backgrounds and abilities of their pupils. However, not all teachers have responded well enough to the issue raised in the last inspection to plan learning based on what pupils know and can already do. Long introductions and tasks introduced steadily in stages mean that too often pupils make gradual rather than good progress. This is particularly noticeable in classes with the most able pupils in them. Expectations of these pupils remain too low. Those pupils who met with me feel that they are not being challenged and stretched to achieve their very best in some subjects.

Improved leadership and management from your SENCo is ensuring that teachers have a better understanding of the needs of pupils they teach with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Personalised 'passports' provide a clear overview of pupils' needs and interests and also include suggestions to consider when planning learning for them. Teaching assistants are suitably deployed to support pupils in lessons. Less progress has been made in sharing information with staff about disadvantaged pupils. Until recently a senior leader has not had responsibility for overseeing the needs of these pupils and monitoring that strategies are applied consistently to help them overcome the difficulties they face.

During our joint observations we saw few examples of the school's agreed strategies staff are expected to use to support disadvantaged pupils. For example, not all teachers target their questions towards disadvantaged pupils to ensure that they engage fully in learning. In some subjects it is unclear whether the school's policy of prioritising the marking of their work is carried out. Pupils' books show that not enough attention is paid to encouraging good presentation skills or helping them develop pride in their work. Your progress tutors are monitoring the welfare and progress of these pupils, but you recognise that leaders can do more to ensure

that strategies to support the learning of disadvantaged pupils are applied consistently.

Your records show that since the last inspection staff are being held more accountable. Pupils are making better progress. Pupils are showing improved attitudes to learning. Procedures to manage behaviour and rewarding pupils for positive behaviour were revised earlier this year. Pupils told me that behaviour has improved a lot. They say they feel safe in school and free from bullying. Conduct noted during the inspection and the records shared with me about pupils' behaviour over time confirm that most pupils behave well. Overall attendance is currently above average. Our observations found that in lessons where learning fails to stimulate pupils' interest most of them continue to behave well but a few quietly disengage and their progress slows.

Knowledgeable and supportive governors are committed to supporting you in monitoring and evaluating the school's work. Their regular visits to school and information shared at governors' meetings enable them to maintain a clear overview of the school's performance and the impact of leaders' actions to improve it.

External support

You have commissioned the local authority to review aspects of the school's safeguarding arrangements. This review confirmed that procedures are suitably robust. The trust is providing you and your senior leadership team with regular support and advice. Brokering support from other schools in the trust has enabled your middle leaders to visit schools and learn from their good practice. This has been particularly beneficial in developing the skills of your middle leaders.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector