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Mrs Gill Ellyard
Interim Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ellyard

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Garden City Academy

Following my visit to your school on 29 January 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, governors and the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- raise the expectations teachers have of what pupils, particularly the most able pupils, can achieve
- ensure that teaching over time is of a consistently good standard
- secure the consistent application of the behaviour policy by all teachers
- improve levels of attendance and reduce persistent absence.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and the substantive headteacher, other leaders, three members of the governing body and a representative of the trust, to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. I evaluated the school's improvement plan and reviewed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation document, the single central register of recruitment checks, minutes of governing body meetings, teaching and learning records, audits of the school's work, and behaviour and attendance records. I met with pupils, visited every class (accompanied by a member of the senior leadership team) and reviewed pupils' work in their books.

Context

Garden City Academy is part of the Reach2 multi-academy trust. The school has a larger-than-average proportion of pupils known to be entitled to free school meals. It has a larger-than-average proportion of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and of pupils with an education, health and care plan or a statement of SEN. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is higher than the national average.

The headteacher and deputy headteacher are presently on planned absence from the school. Until the return of the substantive post-holders, leaders from the trust are in post with you as interim headteacher and an interim deputy headteacher.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, you have taken effective steps to secure improved education for pupils who attend the school. You have increased the attainment of pupils at both key stage 1 and key stage 2. The greater proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check is notable. As well as attaining more highly, pupils now also make greater progress at key stage 2. While pupils do not yet achieve as well at Garden City Academy as pupils elsewhere, your actions mean that outcomes at the school are getting nearer to outcomes nationally. You recognise that an area for particular focus is the support given to the most able pupils. At the moment, these pupils are not making as much progress as they could.

Teaching across the school has improved. You have used carefully tailored professional development to make sure that teachers and other adults are appropriately skilled. Most adults work well with pupils, identifying and overcoming misconceptions quickly. Teachers often set work which interests pupils and enables most pupils to make progress. At its best, teaching combines the strong use of questioning, enthusiasm from the teacher and clearly established expectations of behaviour. When this happens, pupils are eager, attentive and behave well.

There continue to be areas in which the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are not as good as they should be. Some teachers do not apply the school's behavioural policy properly. On some occasions, the work teachers set does not enthuse pupils and so pupils become distracted. Teaching does not yet routinely provide opportunities for the most able to excel, and these pupils are not typically making sufficient progress. Because of these weaknesses, the overall quality of teaching over time is not yet good.

The positive impact of leaders new to the school was recognised in the previous inspection report. Their impressive work to raise standards was put at risk by the simultaneous planned absence of both the headteacher and deputy headteacher. You recognise that developments in the quality of education slowed markedly at this point. However, the trust acted swiftly to shore up the progress being made by putting you and another colleague from the trust in place as interim leaders until the substantive leaders return. Between you, you have ensured that the school continues to improve.

The trust plays a central role in supporting developments in the school. It provides subject expertise, leadership support and governance training. You use the support well in, for example, teachers' professional development, and in securing the accuracy of teachers' assessment, as well as developing the effectiveness of the governing body. The trust is committed to the success of the school and targets its resources well to ensure that the school continues to improve.

Your actions to address pupils' low attendance are working. You monitor absence rates closely. When pupils' attendance falls, you decide on a case-by-case basis which actions will best help to improve that pupil's attendance. Your preferred approach is to work with parents and carers to support them in ensuring that pupils attend well. However, when this does not work, you maintain a firm stance. You are insistent that pupils should attend school regularly. While absence and persistent absence rates continue to be higher than the national average, they are falling.

Middle leaders are now more effective in supporting the development of teaching, learning and assessment. They regularly look at the work pupils are completing in different subjects and observe the quality of teaching. They use the information they gather to support teachers in developing their skills. Middle leaders work with others to ensure that teachers receive effective professional development which meets their needs, and therefore also meets the needs of pupils.

Governors are increasingly effective. They now feel confident to ask challenging questions and increasingly do so. They are knowledgeable about the school and keen to ensure that it continues to improve. Governors I spoke with during the inspection recognise that they still have work to do to ensure that they hold leaders to account fully. They are committed to doing this and have already taken effective steps to improve their own work.

Parents and pupils recognise the impact of leaders' work to improve the school. Pupils I spoke with told me that the school is safe and welcoming. A number of parents also expressed to me that they feel the school is notably better than it previously was.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Hemmings
Her Majesty's Inspector