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Mr Stephen Careless
Montgomery Academy
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Dear Mr Careless,

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Montgomery High School

Following my visit to your school on 9 May 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.

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, members of the academy council and the trust are taking effective action to address the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the principal, executive principal, three members of the academy council and the chief executive officer of the academy trust to which the school belongs. I also met with other members of the school's senior leadership team and with five subject leaders. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school's improvement plans. I reviewed school documentation and listened to pupils' comments during lessons and breaktime. With school leaders, I observed a sample of teaching and pupils' work. I considered the views of professionals who are external to the trust, as presented in their reports of their visits to the school.

Context

Over recent years, there has been much turbulence in staffing. However, since the inspection 12 months ago, the school's senior leadership team has remained substantially the same.

Main findings

School leaders at all levels, members of the academy council and the trust have a very accurate and realistic understanding of exactly how well the school is performing. You say that the school has to make substantial improvements in all aspects if it is to provide its pupils with a good education. It is evident that, since the last inspection, some features of the school have improved both significantly and quickly.

The trust has provided considerable support and guidance to the school. As a result, the quality of the school's leadership is now significantly stronger. The trust has identified strong leaders and developed their skills. It has clarified and strengthened lines of accountability. Above all, the trust has established and very effectively communicated its vision for the quality of education it wants for Montgomery Academy pupils. School leaders and the academy council have engendered a culture which has inspired staff to meet the challenges ahead and the belief that they can overcome them.

The substantially stronger school leadership team is vigorously addressing, and in some cases have addressed, all areas for improvement described in the last inspection report. Improvements achieved so far have demonstrated that this leadership team, with support and guidance from the trust, has the capacity to maintain the rate at which the school is improving. Strategic planning for improvement is strong.

The quality of the leadership of subjects is improving. These leaders are able to evaluate accurately the progress that pupils are making and how effectively teachers are promoting higher standards. Subject leaders can provide their teachers with good advice and support.

Leaders have raised the expectations of the standards of pupil behaviour. Leaders have developed better systems and support to help pupils to behave well. This includes improvements to teaching. As a result, pupils are showing much more endeavour to learn. A minority of older pupils are critical of a system they see as punitive. However, a majority of pupils said that improved behaviour in classes, and generally around the school, helps them to learn better. Younger pupils said that they feel safe and secure around the school.

School staff have had success in improving the attendance of two key groups. A very large proportion of pupils who have a history of being persistently absent are now attending school much more frequently. The attendance of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has also seen marked improvement. It is only over the past two months, however, that the whole school's rate of attendance has begun to show improvement. Leaders and staff are developing a wider range of strategies in order to increase the rate of improvement in pupils' attendance.

In the past, teaching has not been good enough. It is now much better. Leaders have identified a structure to learning that suits the pupils of Montgomery Academy. Teachers have improved their planning. This is based firmly on what their pupils already know, understand and can do. It also includes regular and frequent opportunities for pupils to recall what they have learned and for them to apply their learning in practical situations. Teachers are expected to ensure that pupils are clear about what they are going to learn and why it is valuable to them. Pupils said that the improved consistency in approach is helping to improve their learning.

Teachers of English and mathematics have visited their feeder primary schools. From these visits, teachers have learned that the standards that pupils typically reach on leaving key stage 2 are higher than teachers thought. The teachers said that this has raised their expectations of what their Year 7 pupils should be achieving in their first term in secondary school. An examination of the work of pupils currently in Year 7 shows that their attainment is close to what would be expected for their age group. To further improve pupils' progress in key stage 3, leaders and teachers are currently working with local primary staff to develop a coordinated curriculum for Year 5 to Year 8.

Leaders have consulted widely on how to improve the education they provide for disadvantaged pupils. Leaders have also engaged with an external review of this aspect of the school's provision. Leaders have realised that they need to provide a much more stable and calmer environment for these pupils, one where pupils can easily seek guidance and support. Whole-school strategies are embedding well. The progress that disadvantaged pupils make is improving. Their attendance has also improved. However, these measures do not compare favourably with national figures.

Much stronger leadership of the provision to support pupils with SEND has resulted in these pupils now making improved progress. Their needs are much more clearly identified. Teachers are given much better guidance on how to support these pupils. All aspects of this provision are evaluated accurately, and improvements are introduced quickly.

The teaching of mathematics is improving, because the trust and school leaders have invested much time and talent into the area. There is still wide variability in the quality of teaching. However, the balance is shifting. Many more pupils now

experience well-prepared lessons. These are carefully planned to systematically build on their understanding and include engaging activities. The progress that pupils now make in mathematics is improving, especially for younger pupils. Attainment is beginning to improve, and currently Year 11 pupils may be about half a grade further on than their counterparts last year.

Morale around the school is much higher than it was. Three and a half years ago, staff absence was worse than pupils' absence. The school continues to experience difficulty in recruiting and retaining good teachers. However, staff are now not daunted by the challenge of achieving a good standard of education for the pupils of Montgomery Academy. In fact, they have been inspired to do so.

External support

The school has engaged a range of external reviews of its practice. This has included an analysis of how to improve the impact of its work to support disadvantaged pupils. Leaders are keen to learn from these reviews and have adopted many of the recommendations from them, to good effect.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Mackenzie

Her Majesty's Inspector