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3 April 2014

Mrs Rachel Stirland
Headteacher
The Phoenix Special School
Braithwaite Avenue
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West Yorkshire
BD22 6HZ

Dear Mrs Stirland

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Phoenix Special School, Bradford

Following my visit to your school on 2 April 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the 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 January 2014. 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 recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, the subject leaders for literacy and numeracy, governors and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated and examples of pupils' learning journeys were considered.

Context

High levels of support staff absence are limiting continuity in the provision for pupils' learning.

Main findings

The headteacher has made a brisk start in addressing the school's priorities. She has injected a keen sense of urgency into the school's development work, whilst reflecting carefully on the best ways in which pupils' needs can be met. The realistic view of the school's provision, noted in the recent inspection report, is providing a firm foundation for moving forward. The headteacher knows the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning: weaker teaching is being tackled robustly by ensuring that teachers receive the targeted support needed to improve their practice. Changes have been made to lesson planning so that learning objectives for each pupil are clear and opportunities for assessment during lessons are identified. The school is trialling some smaller class groups to see if this arrangement enables teachers to meet pupils' needs more closely and so improve their learning and progress. Work is underway to improve the learning environment so that this supports learning more effectively. Senior leaders monitor developments and the impact of training regularly, a process that is becoming increasingly streamlined.

Developing an accurate and efficient assessment system is a central focus for senior leaders. They are drawing on best practice, including through a recent visit to an outstanding school. Much work is underway to establish an accurate baseline for each pupil so that suitable targets can be set for them and learning can be planned to help them meet these. Staff are developing a learning journey for each pupil, including photographic evidence, which demonstrates how and when small steps in learning are achieved. Notes made by staff when they observe a pupil mastering a skill are now more informative. Improvements are underway to individual education plans so that these capture the specific targets for pupils, over and above those which form an integral part of the curriculum.

Staff have worked together successfully to draw up a vision for the curriculum which reflects pupils' needs and the challenges they face. This is now the overarching framework for the choice of themes and texts which provide the context for learning. There is a drive to make these as engaging as possible.

The use of signs and symbols is increasing. More pupils are using picture symbols and information about how pupils communicate is being shared more widely, for instance with staff who accompany them to and from school. A new sign is being introduced to all staff weekly and there is a growing awareness of the need for accuracy. Displays now include symbols.

An appraisal system for support staff has been introduced. Their contribution to the school's development is now encapsulated in targets linked to the school's priorities. There is greater clarity about the roles of middle leaders and some are following a recognised course which is helping them develop their leadership skills.

The governing body is well informed and challenges leaders. The headteacher provides clear, concise information to governors which they triangulate. In addition to frequent visits from individual governors, focused learning walks have been introduced. Governors say it is very helpful to look at specific areas of work on which they can then report back. Plans to link governors to classes are in hand.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority regularly challenges the school through meetings at which progress is evaluated. These also provide an opportunity to identify and commission support. Support from local authority consultants for developing learning in mathematics and in structuring a new curriculum is valued by staff. Help in identifying good practice and organising school-to-school support is welcomed by leaders.

As part of the District Achievement Partnership (DAP), the school benefits from an annual programme of performance reviews. The partnership has also facilitated training, including for middle leaders. The DAP's assessment portfolio is a key resource on which the school will draw.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Bradford.

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector