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Mr Andrew Minchin
Headteacher
The Robert Napier School
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Dear Mr Minchin

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Robert Napier School

Following my visit to your school on 5 July 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 recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- reduce persistent absence, especially of disadvantaged pupils
- embed the improvements in the quality of teaching, especially in mathematics
- improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils, in particular those in key stage 4.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, the local governing body and the multi-academy trust chief executive officer to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I visited some lessons alongside senior leaders and looked at samples of pupils' work. I met with a group of pupils formally and spoke to some in lessons. I scrutinised school information, including the school improvement plan, information about the use of pupil premium funding, pupils' outcomes, and attendance and behaviour information. I checked the school's single central register and discussed the school's work to safeguard pupils, in and out of school.

Context

Since the last inspection, 23 staff have left the school, including four members of the leadership team. Seventeen have joined, of which 13 are still working at the school. The local governing body has also changed and all but two governors are new since the previous inspection.

Main findings

You, ably supported by your leadership team, have worked with determination and focus to drive up standards throughout the school. You are resolute that the school will provide the best quality of education and will prepare pupils well for their next steps. Soon after taking up post, you changed the school's curriculum, ensuring that it closely meets the needs of pupils and develops their aspirations. You evaluated accurately the other strengths and weaknesses of the school and created a well-considered school improvement plan. This has also provided a clear structure for leaders and governors to use and has supported school improvement well.

Leaders have systematically improved the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment by establishing clear lesson structures and supporting staff to follow these. Leaders have also used staff development to improve the quality of questioning and assessment. Teachers understand how to use assessment to judge what pupils understand and what they need to do in order to make strong progress. This is increasingly effective as it is embedded and refined across the school. Leaders monitor the success of this work carefully and provide personalised support and challenge as required.

Extensive work has taken place to improve consistency in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in mathematics. The success can be seen in pupils' improved progress, especially in lower year groups, where pupils do not have to catch up from a legacy of poor curriculum design and teaching. Leaders are aware that there is still much to do in order to bring the consistent quality of provision in this department up to that of the stronger areas in the school. Leaders' evaluations of the work in this area are accurate and they recognise the further steps that are required to embed improvements.

The curriculum now supports pupils' progress well. It matches the needs of pupils and addresses gaps in their prior learning. The shift to routinely tested 'structured knowledge homework' has helped pupils to improve their breadth of knowledge and

understanding of the topics that they are studying. Pupils and parents are very positive about this type of homework. Leaders have found that pupils are more confident when they encounter new, often challenging, material in their lessons. Pupils recognise that they have a stronger knowledge base around which to contextualise and approach new learning in lessons. Pupils also benefit from ongoing careers information, education and guidance which help to raise their aspirations and focus them on achievement.

The curriculum in the sixth form also supports students' learning and prepares them well for their next steps. Leaders have made the variety of study options more flexible. These allow students to mix and match academic and vocational pathways as meet their needs. Pastoral support is effective, and leaders ensure that students enrol on the programme of study that best matches their needs and aspirations. Students are provided with work-related learning and experiences of higher study that raise aspirations and support their core learning aim. The support for students who have to retake their English or mathematics GCSE qualification is strong. In 2017, more students attained a standard pass in these qualifications than typical nationally.

The programme to address barriers to learning for pupils who are disadvantaged is making a positive difference. You responded well to the external review of this work that you commissioned following the recommendation in the previous inspection report. You evaluate all initiatives carefully in order to assess what difference they are making for pupils and the value for money they provide. You quickly changed previous spending that was not effective. Governors have increased their level of challenge for the use of this additional funding and hold leaders to account effectively. This funding has successfully helped to improve pupils' progress, especially in Years 7 and 8. You are very aware that this work needs to continue, especially to further support key stage 4 pupils to overcome the legacy of poor provision and engagement.

Pupils who have benefited from this work are adamant that it has made a significant difference to their approach to school and general self-esteem. Several described how they are now able to explain their ideas calmly and with confidence. One pupil reflected that he would not have felt comfortable talking with a visitor before this work. Others identified their improved behaviour and approach to their learning, proudly telling me that they also enjoy school much more when they are not being told off for misbehaving.

Leaders' work to reduce exclusions has also been effective. Much work is done to support pupils who struggle to conform to school expectations. Pupils told me that behaviour 'is really good', and I saw groups of pupils who were keen to learn and were engaged with their lessons. The new 'learning referral centre' provides support for pupils who are at risk of fixed or permanent exclusion. Leaders ensure that this work successfully addresses the issues that are getting in the way of pupils' success. The focus on pro-active, preventative work is effective.

One of the biggest challenges that you face is to improve pupils' attendance. You undertake a myriad of activities and make full use of every external agency you identify that can support pupils and their families. While there has been success with this overall, and you have built strong relationships with many families, there remain pupils whose persistent absence is a major concern. This is hindering their learning and progress. You are acutely aware that this is a major obstacle to school improvement and continue to work hard to tackle it.

External support

School leaders make good use of the support provided by the trust. For example, the quality assurance and standardisation processes across the trust have helped leaders to validate teachers' assessments of pupils' work. Leaders across the trust provide a strong level of challenge for each other and share initiatives that work, such as the 'structured knowledge homework' project.

The trust has also provided strong support for governors. It instigated a skills' audit and ensured that a balanced range of skills is represented among governors. It has also been successful in recruiting parent governors. It has trained governors well to hold leaders to account and these improvements can be seen in governors' documentation. The trust has also supported leaders with teacher recruitment, especially through its initial teacher-training programme, and the further professional development of teachers at every level in their careers.

You also access support from the local authority to help to improve pupils' attendance. You work closely with the police and other external agencies, especially if they have the slightest safeguarding concern.

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

Yours sincerely

Lucy English
Her Majesty's Inspector