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Mr Matthew Eastham
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Eastham

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Penwortham Priory Academy

Following my visit to your school on 1 March 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the 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 visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in November 2015. 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- evaluate how well the planned actions to improve the school are progressing so that next steps can be precisely identified
- further raise expectations so that pupils present their written work as well as possible
- increase the attendance of disadvantaged pupils so that they miss as little learning time as possible.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with: you; senior leaders; subject leaders for English, mathematics, science and humanities; a group of eight pupils; two members of the governing body and the school improvement partner to discuss the action taken since the previous inspection. I evaluated documents, including the school's self-evaluation summary, improvement plans, information about teaching and learning and pupils' achievement, minutes of meetings of the governing body, and a summary of the review of the school's use of the pupil premium. Samples of pupils' work were examined. Accompanied by you, I undertook a tour to see the school at work. I also scrutinised the single central record of employment checks on staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection, senior leaders' responsibilities have been changed to allow greater scrutiny of the quality of teaching and learning, and of the school's use of data on pupils' performance. In addition, a senior leader is providing extra support to science. Leadership of humanities subjects has been reorganised. An experienced teacher, already on the staff, is teaching more geography. An extended leadership team has been established to allow senior leaders to work more closely with middle leaders.

The system to track pupils' achievement, which had been introduced just before the previous inspection, has been further developed.

A review of the school's use of the pupil premium has been completed and a review of governance is in progress.

Main findings

Leadership and management have become more effective. This has ensured that your and senior leaders' vision for the school to help pupils to achieve academic success and the highest possible standards is starting to be better realised. Senior leaders know what needs to be done and have changed the way senior and middle leadership are organised to ensure that improvement happens. In addition, this makes it easier for senior leaders to hold middle leaders to account. Expectations of staff and pupils have been raised. For example, middle leaders are now expected to take the initiative in challenging subject teachers to be as effective as possible.

Leaders have prepared plans to set out how they will improve the school overall and to address specific areas of weakness. Checks are in place to allow leaders and governors to evaluate whether the plans are on track. This evaluation is at an early stage and is sometimes too general to allow leaders and governors to identify decisive next steps for further improvement. The headteacher of a local teaching school conducted the review of the school's use of the pupil premium which was

suggested at the last inspection. This review provided helpful information for the school and leaders have taken its findings seriously. They have prepared and implemented an action plan in response and provided clear written guidance for all teachers and governors to help them to ensure that increases in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils continue. Soon after the previous inspection, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils increased. However, such pupils' absence has now increased again to match the level typically seen last year and is more than that of other pupils. This is in part due to new pupils joining the school. School leaders are aware of this and continue to challenge disadvantaged pupils with poor attendance to attend more regularly.

A new system to collect, analyse and use information about how well pupils are doing was introduced shortly before the previous inspection. This has been refined and is being better used by leaders and teachers to understand whether any pupils are at risk of falling behind others. Testing of pupils is more frequent so that up-to-date information is available. The additional testing has included extra mock examinations for Year 11 pupils; these were taking place at the time of this inspection. The new trial examinations extend previous effective practice in English and mathematics to all subjects. The school's own information indicates that, over this year so far, the achievement of Year 11 pupils overall has increased by roughly half a GCSE grade. While information is collected on pupils in all years, its use to plan how teaching can be adjusted to increase pupils' progress is most developed for Year 11, but is at an early stage for Year 10. The new system has allowed leaders to set higher targets for pupils in Key Stage 3. In turn, these have set higher expectations for pupils, teachers and parents.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved. The new systems for leadership have led middle leaders and teachers to become more self-confident and have encouraged them to share effective approaches. For example, seating plans, which include detailed information about pupils' previous achievement, were developed in English but are now also being used in science as part of the strategy to raise achievement in science. Teachers' marking gives pupils clearer guidance about how to improve their work, although some teachers too frequently accept untidy work without challenging pupils to try harder to improve it. The pupils I talked with said that they felt that they received the right amount of homework. However, leaders identify this as an aspect where pupils could still do more.

The school's single central record of employment checks meets requirements. This contributes to the school's work to make sure pupils are properly protected. Since the previous inspection, key leaders have undertaken training about ways to reduce the risk of pupils experiencing radicalisation or extremist views; leaders intend that this training will now be shared with all staff. I saw pupils behaving well in lessons and around the school. I also saw good relationships among pupils, and between pupils and teachers.

Governors accepted the findings of the previous inspection and have worked closely with the school improvement partner to improve their effectiveness. He has very nearly completed the review of governance suggested in the last inspection report. Governors are being provided with better information about how the school is doing and have added to this through their links with different subjects. Their better understanding of the school has allowed them to provide more effective challenge to leaders, for example in shaping the way the school improvement plan is evaluated.

External support

Since the previous inspection, school leaders have increased their contact with the school improvement partner. His work has provided continuing support and specific advice, such as that following his review of the humanities department. You act on his advice and his insights have helped you to improve the school.

The school has continuing contact with Broughton High School and its linked teaching school alliance, and other secondary schools in the local 'family of schools'. I saw how this approach is contributing to your school's improvement in, for example, the review of how the funding for disadvantaged pupils is used. The school contributes to these partnerships and will soon be hosting activity aimed at sharing effective approaches to teaching and learning.

The school continues to use local authority services where you judge that this will support pupils. You have close and timely contact if any significant issues about pupils' safety arise. This helps to protect pupils.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Lancashire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector