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Ben Layzell
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Dear Mr Layzell

Requires improvement monitoring inspection of Atherton High School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 14 December 2022, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and took place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous graded (section 5) inspections.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, representatives of the academy trust, trustees, governors and the local authority the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also met with other leaders, staff and pupils. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Atherton High School continues to require improvement. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that teachers have the information, knowledge and skills that they need to support pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) effectively in lessons.

Main findings

Since the most recent graded inspection, one governor has left the local governing body and two have joined. Leaders have increased the number of staff working at the school to strengthen capacity further. Six teachers have left the school and eight have joined. An additional six support staff have taken up new positions. The number of pupils has increased.

You, and other leaders, understand the causes of weaknesses in the quality of education and pupils' attendance identified at the last inspection. Together, you have acted with rigour and pace to strengthen the school's work in these areas.

The trust and local governing body work effectively with you and other leaders. They have a detailed understanding of their role and of what you and they are doing to improve curriculum thinking, develop assessment and improve pupils' attendance. They use their accurate understanding of the school's priorities and actions to support and challenge leaders effectively. Together, you have successfully overcome challenging barriers, such as staff recruitment.

The trust provides you and other leaders with school improvement support. You have established clear, well-focused and measurable plans to improve the quality of education and pupils' attendance. These plans are helping you to secure demonstrable improvements.

Subject leaders and teachers have benefited from subject-specific support provided by the trust. This is carefully aligned with leaders' ongoing support for staff. As a result, they understand better how to plan and sequence curriculums. They are now suitably equipped to lead their curriculum areas with confidence and skill.

You have ensured that subject teams have received the training, mentoring and time that they need to strengthen subject curriculums. You and other leaders have ensured that staff have been carefully guided and challenged to identify the important knowledge that pupils should acquire. As a result, staff have ensured that new curriculum thinking is more rigorous and that content is suitably ambitious.

You, and other leaders, have also enabled staff to understand better the purpose of different assessment strategies, and subject leaders and staff have worked positively together to design these. They are now more closely matched to the knowledge that pupils should acquire and remember. As a result, staff select more confidently and use better assessment strategies in lessons and at the end of units of work. Increasingly, staff and pupils have a better understanding of the gaps that pupils, including those with SEND, have in their knowledge. However, this is still mixed in a small number of subjects.

You, and other leaders, are helping staff to make better use of this richer assessment information. Staff appreciate these opportunities, which are beginning to help them to make more informed decisions about what pupils, including those with SEND, should learn

next. You have suitable plans to sustain this important work to ensure that all staff do this effectively.

You are reviewing the information that is shared with subject teachers about the needs of pupils with SEND. However, this information is not always clear or helpfully organised. As a result, there is variation in the quality of help that teachers give pupils with SEND in lessons. Current systems to evaluate the quality of this help are limited. They do not give leaders the information they need to identify and strengthen teachers' knowledge and skills in this area.

You, and other leaders, carefully identify gaps in the knowledge of pupils who are at the earliest stages of learning to read. Staff provide pupils with appropriate help with their reading, where it is needed. Pupils benefit from the help that well-trained staff, who have appropriate knowledge and expertise, give them. Staff regularly check that this is helping them to improve their reading. These pupils make considerable gains in reading with accuracy and fluency.

You, other leaders and staff promote a love of reading. Collectively, you ensure that pupils are helped to develop vocabulary and reading skills in their subject lessons. Staff develop pupils' wider reading effectively. Pupils benefit from regular opportunities to read novels or other texts related to their wider personal development. They enjoy daily reading time.

Following the last inspection, you quickly restructured pastoral teams to provide more capacity to improve pupils' attendance. You and other leaders have established new and more appropriate expectations. You communicate these well to pupils, parents and carers. You have implemented more rigorous systems to identify and act on concerns about pupils' attendance. Staff are increasingly taking measures to help pupils to attend more. Pupils feel more encouraged and helped to attend school. As a result, rates of overall and persistent absence have decreased since the last inspection. That said, pupils' attendance is still too low. You and other leaders understand the barriers that currently contribute to some pupils' poor attendance. You have suitable plans to tackle these rates of attendance and further realise your suitably ambitious aspirations.

You, and other leaders, have made effective use of external support. A national leader of education has reviewed expectations and systems for attendance. You have used this to develop an appropriately focused long-term strategy to improve attendance.

You have ensured that the subjects that most need it have benefited from additional specialist help from independent consultants. Leaders of these subjects have used this guidance to identify carefully the important knowledge that pupils should acquire.

You have very recently arranged for a specialist leader of education to help to strengthen further the systems and support for pupils with SEND. You are conscious of the need to ensure that all staff are equipped with the information, knowledge and skills they need to help these pupils consistently well in the classroom.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Education Partnership Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Wigan. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Michael Pennington
His Majesty's Inspector