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Mr Malcom Shaw
Headteacher
The Willows School Academy Trust
Stipularis Drive
Hayes
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Dear Mr Shaw

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Willows School Academy Trust

Following my visit to your school on 17 April 2015, 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 December 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. The school should take further action to:

- Strengthen governance through:
 - increasing the number of governors with the best skills set for the school's needs
 - completing the external review of governance with greater urgency and acting on key recommendations
 - wider partnership working with high performing mainstream schools and academies
 - monitoring the school's action plans more precisely

- Strengthen the links between wider curriculum planning and assessment in order to evaluate student progress across the whole of the curriculum – beyond English and mathematics.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, two governors, including the Chair and three middle and senior leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke with the school's improvement partner and your strategic adviser on the telephone. You accompanied me on a short tour of the school during which we made brief visits to lessons. I spoke with groups of pupils and examined samples of their work. I evaluated the school's internal performance information, minutes of governing body meetings, and the school's action plans.

Context

Since the last inspection, no changes in staffing have occurred. The Chair of Governors resigned in December 2014 and the vice-chair was then elected to be her substantive replacement with immediate effect. Pupil numbers have increased since November 2014 – due to increased local authority demand and additional need for short stay placements as pupils await assessment for potential statements of special educational need.

Main findings

Significant progress has been made since the last inspection. Senior and middle leaders have been singularly focused and relentless in improving standards across the school. The impact of such determination is clear in improving standards in pupils' behaviour, uniform, writing (in both key stages) and in more exciting, challenging lessons in all subjects – including science, history and geography.

Senior leaders remain correct in their assessment of what needs to be done. Their action plans are clear and direct and they provide accurate evidence of the progress of the school. Lines of accountability for the plan, shared amongst all leaders, are clear and appropriate. Of particular note are the plan headings entitled 'what success will look like' – these make absolutely clear to everyone in the school exactly what needs to be done, and how, to meet and beat targets. The Headteacher and his team are determined that the school provides high quality learning and care for all its pupils – everything the school does must be done in the 'Willows way'. However, arrangements for the monitoring of the plan's impact by governors need to be more robust.

Leaders have responded energetically to the need to rapidly improve writing standards in the school. Comprehensive staff training, rooted in clear, diagnostic marking guidance, is resulting in improving standards. The impact of such training is clear in the change in pupils' written work. The difference in the quality of written work over the last 6 months is patent. Pupils say they are challenged in lessons to

produce 'better and longer' pieces of written work and it is clear that this is so from their books. The significant gap between standards in reading and writing in Summer 2014 is narrowing for all pupils of all abilities and ages.

Similarly, all staff are increasingly confident in assessing the progress of groups of pupils. With the support of skilled external experts, leaders have worked hard in developing improved assessment systems and routines. As a result, staff comment confidently on the progress being made by all children in their lessons. Effective 'baselining' assessments taken when pupils enter the school mean that robust, accurate targets for progress are now set and monitored.

Lesson planning also continues to improve. Teachers and support staff are more aware of the specific needs of the children in their lessons; they now plan lessons which stretch and challenge their pupils – again of all ages and abilities. As one Year 6 pupil put it, 'everything is about learning now'. Leaders do acknowledge, however, that there is more to be done to further improve the planning of lessons in subjects beyond English and mathematics. The school's plans to introduce music lessons are exciting and should enhance the already strong therapeutic support provided by sound teaching in art and drama. The planned further additions to history, geography and science lessons should further complement a wider, more rounded, education for the pupils. This will, in turn, prepare them better for their education after they leave Willows.

Marking is getting better too. Teachers and support staff have embraced recent marking training with enthusiasm and developing expertise. Marking in most books is skilled, accurate and detailed and, when pupils respond to it, their progress is clear in exercise books and classroom displays. However, there is more to be done to ensure that children work harder. The school's plans to develop and extend self and peer marking are appropriate in this regard. At present, the staff are working very hard indeed to ensure that the children make at least good progress; the pupils need to work equally hard.

The performance management of staff is now more meaningful. Targets are challenging and realistic; regular performance assessment reviews are held; and governors and leaders know, accurately, how most of their staff are performing at any one time. The consequent improvements in the quality of lessons and in pupils' progress, especially in writing, come as no surprise. Leaders and governors do acknowledge, however, that this area of the school's work is still a work in progress as all staff and new governors settle into the routine of systematic performance measurement.

Governors are beginning to provide better support and challenge for the school. The recent turbulence in governing body membership is now resolved. The Chair and vice-chair of Governors are committed to increased partnership working with good and outstanding schools, including a teaching school alliance, to ensure better education for the school's pupils. They have responded positively to the findings of

the most recent inspection, and they now have a more accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The linked areas for specific improvement in the action plans to individual governors require strengthening. New members joining the governing body at the end of April 2015 will assist in this process and their induction and basic training require completion as quickly as possible. The strength and clarity of the school's action plans needs to be replicated in the school's records of governance. Governors' plans to review the professional administration of their meetings should assist in this regard. The required external review of governance should be completed quickly.

External support

The school has made extensive use of high quality external support.

The school's consultant improvement partner's work with the staff in improving the curriculum, teaching and assessment is producing clear improvement. His insistence that the staff behave as 'assessment kleptomaniacs', collecting and shaping strong assessment practice as their skills and confidence increase, is having a positive impact on practice.

Similarly, the headteacher's partnership with a neighbouring outstanding secondary school is reaping dividends. The strategic adviser now linked with Willows has worked closely with governors, deepening their skills in analysing pupil and staff performance. Her support for governors' plans to expand their number and seek more formal alliances with high performing partners is welcomed by governors.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of Governors, the Education Funding Agency and the Director of Children's Services for Hillingdon.

Yours sincerely

Debbie Clinton
Her Majesty's Inspector