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Dr Chris Ingate
Principal
Birchwood High School
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Dear Dr Ingate

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birchwood High School

Following my visit to your academy on 15 January 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in July 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 recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good academy.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, the Chair and four members of the governing body, three groups of pupils and a representative from the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I scrutinised a range of academy documentation relating to achievement and the quality of teaching. Together, we visited a number of lessons to observe pupils' learning. I also scrutinised the academy's records of recruitment checks of staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection, a deputy headteacher has left the school, and has been replaced by an assistant principal. You have also appointed a new head of English and a head of history. Eleven teachers left the academy during the last academic year. The governing body has appointed a new vice-chair.

Main findings

You responded swiftly to the outcome of the previous section 5 inspection and produced an action plan which addresses all of the key points for action. The plan would benefit from having all quantifiable measures for achieving your targets identified in this document, rather than having to refer to supplementary supporting documentation. This would enable those monitoring the success of the plan, particularly the governing body, to identify more easily whether you are on track to achieve your targets. A positive feature of the monitoring procedures is the monthly evaluation of progress which governors have asked you to produce and present to them.

Your self-evaluation summary now makes more reference to the achievement of different groups of pupils. The academy is currently evaluating its overall effectiveness and will produce a realistic working document to include the findings from this monitoring visit. Governors agree that more time is needed to demonstrate that some of your initiatives have become embedded and are able to demonstrate clear impact. For example, you are not yet in a position to demonstrate that the gaps in the achievement between disadvantaged pupils in the school and others nationally are closing rapidly, although it is clear that they are starting to close.

You have wisely re-evaluated the quality of teaching in the academy by observing each teacher in the classroom. Your evaluation of teaching is informed by a range of evidence, which includes teachers' planning and marking, and pupils' outcomes. You have clearly raised teachers' awareness of the importance of closing the gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others in the academy. My scrutiny of teachers' documentation and discussions with individual teachers show that they have a better understanding of the needs of these pupils and are using more effective strategies to ensure that their rate of progress increases. These strategies include greater consideration of where to seat individual pupils, marking their books as a priority and making good use of additional information provided by heads of year. Teachers are keen to learn from one another and share good practice. You have also formed a teaching and learning steering group on which each faculty has a representative. You have worked productively with learning support assistants to ensure that they maximise their effectiveness in the classroom. These colleagues have monthly training sessions as a group, and participate fully in whole-school training sessions. You now expect them to record the impact of their work in bespoke planners. This makes them consider the approaches they adopt and encourages them to be reflective practitioners.

You have acknowledged the need to tackle underachievement in science, and meet regularly with subject leaders to hold them to account. Your regular gathering of information on pupils' outcomes in science is used to identify areas of underachievement and to provide more timely support. Some teaching in science still requires improvement, and although most teachers across the school adhere to the academy's marking policy, this is not always the case in science. Science teachers have benefited from specific training on how to test pupils' understanding of what they are being taught through carefully structured questioning. You have also reviewed how you timetable science so that more pupils have access to specialist rooms and resources.

You acted quickly to tackle the weaknesses in your systems for keeping academy policies up to date, particularly those relating to the safeguarding of children. Your safeguarding policy is now compliant and refers staff to the most recent guidance on how to keep children safe. You have also introduced an electronic system to record safeguarding matters efficiently, which ensures that key staff have instant access to relevant information. Safeguarding also features on the agenda at every meeting of the governing body.

Governors have reflected on the effectiveness of their practice and believe that this has helped them focus more on adopting efficient procedures. One member of the governing body is now linked to the senior leader responsible for achievement data. This has strengthened their understanding of the performance of different groups of pupils across the academy.

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

External support

The academy is keen to engage with external support. The academy commissioned external reviews of both the pupil premium and governance, which have taken place. Governors should identify whether the pupil premium funding is achieving value for money and improving outcomes for these pupils at a rapid enough rate. The academy has plans to commission an external review of the effectiveness of its provision when the time is right. Governors now ask more challenging questions of the academy's senior leaders which is reflected in the minutes of their meetings.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire and the Education Funding Agency

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector