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28 February 2013

Mrs Maryssa O'Connor
Principal
Thornaby Academy
Baysdale Road
Stockton-On-Tees
TS17 9DB

Dear Mrs O'Connor

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Thornaby Academy

Following my visit to your school on 27 February 2013 I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in October 2012. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

Joan Hewitt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2012

- Ensure that the quality of teaching and learning is at least good by:
 - making sure that teachers use assessment information consistently and precisely to meet the identified learning needs of all students
 - making sure that teachers provide regular opportunities for students to take an active part in lessons, so they are involved in collaborative and practical activities and develop their ability to work independently
 - improving students' enthusiasm for learning through more frequent and varied ways to develop their verbal and thinking skills, and confidence, for example, through paired talk, group discussion and class debate
 - ensuring that the marking of students' work, in all subjects, provides clear feedback about how well they have done and what is required to improve.
- Raise standards, particularly in English and mathematics, and ensure that all students make progress which at least matches national expectations at Key Stage 4 by:
 - raising teachers expectations of students' capabilities and ensuring that the targets for students at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are sufficiently clear and ambitious
 - using the academy's new assessment regime effectively to make certain that students' progress towards challenging targets is monitored rigorously and actions taken systematically to tackle gaps in students' knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers by:
 - equipping all those in leadership positions with the skills and knowledge necessary to accurately monitor the staff's performance so that feedback is of a consistently high quality
 - ensuring that effective leadership of mathematics brings about rapid improvement in teaching and learning so that standards rise quickly and students make at least good progress
 - rigorously using performance management to secure good teaching and leadership.
- Continue the academy's efforts to reduce persistent absence further and improve attendance amongst all groups of students.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 27 February 2013

Evidence

The inspector met with the Principal, a group of students, members of staff, the Governing Body, and a representative of the sponsors. The inspector observed lessons with senior leaders, made a series of brief visits to lessons, looked at students' work and scrutinised documents, including the academy's progress information. The inspector concentrated on the quality of improvements in teaching in mathematics and English.

Context

A new director for mathematics has been appointed. He is joining the academy in April 2013. The new building is due to open in June 2013. There are no other significant changes affecting the academy.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The Principal has maintained a steely eye on bringing about improvements. She continues to be supported strongly by senior leaders, governors and sponsors. Together, they are developing a culture committed to systematic improvement. The programmes of support to improve weak teaching continue to get results. Teachers are keen to improve their practice. Senior leaders offer effective coaching and they give teachers clear-cut advice and practical tips on how to improve their teaching.

Middle leaders are continuing to gain confidence in checking the quality of lessons and students' work. Senior leaders make their expectations clear and offer the right support in helping to develop skills and confidence. Some key members of staff now have strong skills and do not need as much support as they have in the past. Where staff are less confident, senior leaders continue to offer effective help. For example, middle leaders have observed lessons with experienced colleagues to help them pin point what actions would improve students' learning.

Governors and sponsors are also working hard to support improvements in the academy. They have increased their visits and collect useful first-hand information. For example, they came in to do a 'behaviour' walk to see how students were responding to more active approaches in lessons. They used this knowledge to check with senior leaders if this was improving students' achievement and enjoyment.

Governor and sponsors have improved the way good teaching and leadership are rewarded. There is an unequivocal link to teachers' and leaders' performance and their progression. Staff are clear how students' progress and the quality of their teaching is used to evaluate their performance.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Students' achievement is improving because teachers are making sure more lessons are active. Students say they have more chances to work together

and solve problems for themselves. The academy's reliable progress information confirms the improvements, especially in English.

- Teachers continue to make use of the 'progress packs' to improve their marking. Students' books are marked regularly and teachers routinely make helpful comments about what students need to do next to improve their work. Students do not always follow up these comments because teachers do not check this carefully enough.
- Students' attendance is also improving but it is still below the national average and there are still gaps for some groups of students, such as those who have extra funding through the pupil premium.
- Teachers are making better use of the academy's progress information to plan lessons to meet students' individual needs. Teachers make use of questions to gauge students' understanding but they accept one or two word answers too readily to give them a really accurate picture of how well students are doing.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The decline in students' achievement in mathematics has been halted but students' attainment remains low in this subject. Senior leaders have made sure teachers have improved their management of students' behaviour and how they make learning more active. Leaders have also made strong use of visiting consultants and advanced skills teachers. However, this is no substitute for strong subject leadership and the academy has sorely missed a director of mathematics. Teachers do not have enough help in developing effective ways of teaching mathematics and helping students to catch up on gaps in their knowledge.
- The gaps in the rates of progress made by different students are closing but they are still too wide. There remains too much variation across different year groups and subjects. Leaders are acutely aware of this and they have strong systems to pick up quickly on any students lagging behind. They have organised small groups with specialist teaching to help students in Years 10 and 11 to catch up quickly. Nevertheless, this remains an important area for improvement.

External support

Leaders, governors and sponsors have been successful in building a range of partnerships. This is helping them to improve their expertise in a number of areas, but especially in improving the skills of middle leaders. For example, the director of English has worked with a specialist leader in education from another school. As a result of this work she has developed strong systems to share good practice in the academy and effective ways of checking the quality of teachers' work.