

Serco Inspections
Colmore Plaza
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9163
Direct email: lewis.mackie1@serco.com



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Edward Gaynor
Headteacher
The Astley Cooper School
St Agnell's Lane
Hemel Hempstead
HP2 7HL

Dear Mr Gaynor

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to The Astley Cooper School

Following my visit to your school on 26 March 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, the Chair and Vice Chair of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a group of students from Year 11. A range of documentation was reviewed, including the outcomes of monitoring activities and the most recent governing body minutes. The school's action plan was evaluated.

Context

Since the last inspection, four new members of staff have joined the school, including two middle leaders; one of these leaders is for disabled students and those who have special educational needs. The school is in the process of appointing a new deputy headteacher, as the current one is retiring at the end of the academic year.

Main findings

The school accepts that the outcomes from the recent inspection are the right ones. There is a strong commitment to secure improvements to teaching and to raise students' achievement. There is no complacency. Leaders, including governors have made suitable plans to address the priorities identified by the last inspection. The school improvement plan has been revised and there are clear procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of actions that are being taken to improve the school. The action plan addresses all of the areas of improvement identified in the last inspection. There are suitable, measurable success criteria to help check how well the key actions are being carried out. However, the plan does not refer to the proportion of students who are capable of making better than expected progress. Key milestones to chart the progress of actions being taken are also not clearly identified.

Senior leaders have responded with sufficient urgency and have taken immediate action to:

- improve the quality of teaching by supporting and challenging teaching which is less than good, for example, by making use of the best practice that is in the school
- review the provision for students who are disabled and those who have special educational needs so that there is greater understanding among staff about students' needs and how these can be met fully
- focus more on how students' literacy skills, especially that of the boys, can be improved
- bring more rigour to the tracking of students' progress and its link with teachers' performance.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- ensure that the school action plan provides more details about the proportion of students capable of making better than expected progress
- identify clear milestones in the action plan to help governors evaluate the speed with which actions are leading to improvements.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority adviser and senior leaders are working well in partnership to secure improvements. A part-time secondment of an assistant headteacher from a local partner school is helping to support an external view to the quality of teaching and learning.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Education for Hertfordshire, and as below.

Yours sincerely

Dilip Kadodwala
Her Majesty's Inspector