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21 May 2013

Mr Chris Harris
Headteacher
Larkmead School
Faringdon Road
Abingdon
Oxfordshire
OX14 1RF

Dear Mr Harris

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Larkmead School

Following my visit to your school on Tuesday 21 May, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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 February 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and other senior leaders and with three members of the Governing Body to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I spoke on the telephone to a school improvement adviser who has been working with the school through an arrangement with the local authority. I visited a number of classrooms, mainly in English, mathematics and science, and looked at a range of documentation. I evaluated the school improvement plan.

Context

Since the inspection, six teachers have resigned their posts. A new role has been created at middle leadership level, with responsibility for the achievement of students eligible for support from pupil premium funding (those entitled to free school meals, in local authority care, or from families in the armed services).

Main findings

Governors describe themselves as 'collectively impatient' for better achievement. They have undertaken significant internal review of their work and of the quality of information they receive from the school. They want to be better able to challenge student achievement, by receiving information about progress that is clearly presented and provided far enough in advance of their meetings to allow them to prepare more searching questions. They want to see greater urgency and pace in the improvement of teaching and in the development of middle leaders, but do not have a clear picture of which teachers are good or outstanding practitioners. They have made initial contact with the local authority to arrange an external review of their work, but have been uncertain about when best to undertake this, leading to some delay. Immediately following my visit, I arranged a link with a National Leader of Education in an outstanding school to support and speed up this process.

The headteacher, governors and senior leaders agree that the key to improvement is better, more regular monitoring of teaching. The headteacher has drawn up plans for an increase in lesson observations, with clear routes to improvement and consequences for persistent underperformance. This is supported by a computer database that is potentially an effective tool for collecting and analysing the outcomes of observations. However, both of these initiatives are planned to start in September. This is too late. Students cannot wait this long for teaching to improve.

Similarly, inconsistent marking and assessment have been tackled, in the first instance, via a discussion paper which sets out the principles of effective assessment and associated theories of learning. There has been evaluation by senior leaders of different departmental policies on marking. However, this is too removed from the essence of the problem: evaluation needs to be of the quality of marking, not the quality of policy. There has not yet been enough first hand scrutiny of work in lessons or direct challenge of poor marking.

Some actions since the inspection have been effective: a few of the weakest teachers have left the school in the face of pressure to improve their practice. There has been an overhaul of science courses, so that they are better matched to students' abilities from September. Science teachers have visited outstanding schools to see how high achievement in science is delivered and to bring back better ways of working. Extra teaching groups have been created in English. There has been strongly focused intervention in Y11 to secure better GCSE grades; as a result the school's predictions for 2013 indicate an improvement on 2012, especially in English.

The school improvement plan consists of a list of actions linked directly to the inspection findings. However, it does not provide a strategic vision for how the school will achieve a 'good' judgement within the set time frame because it does not set out clear criteria for what good will look like. Nor does it detail the monitoring that will take place to ensure that change happens quickly and securely.

In short, action is being taken, much of it focused on the right priorities. However, some key levers for improvement are happening too slowly or are obscured by policy, rather than getting down to the business of improving what goes on in the classroom.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- bring forward the implementation of new approaches to monitoring the quality of teaching to early June 2013, so that challenge is swift where there is persistent underperformance
- review and revise the school improvement plan to ensure that it details, not just actions towards improvement, but what success will look like, how it will be monitored and when
- supplement the work already undertaken to strengthen governance by linking with an outstanding governing body and enlisting its help to undertake a review of governance.

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

External support

The local authority has provided the support of a school improvement partner to the school until recently, although this arrangement had come to an end prior to this visit. His review of the school in October 2012 drew many of the same conclusions as the Ofsted inspection four months later. The local authority is reviewing how best to continue its support to the school following changes in personnel. The school has made some use of outstanding schools to research best practice and provide advice.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire and as below.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter will be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA)