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11 June 2013

Mr David Terry
Principal
The Sutton Academy
Elton Head Road
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Merseyside
WA9 5AU

Dear Mr Terry

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Sutton Academy, St. Helens

Following my visit to your school on 11 June 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 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 March 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders including head of sixth form, subject leaders in English, mathematics, science and geography, representatives of the Governing Body and the sponsor to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement/action plan, self-evaluation and teaching / learning documents were evaluated. I met with students in Years 8, 10 and sixth form and carried out a work scrutiny of books in Years 8 and 10.

Context

Since the inspection in March, four members of staff have left the academy.

Main findings

The academy has brought together its post-inspection action plan and school development plan to make one efficient working document that is data-rich and enables regular checking. Targets are rightly stretching. For example, over the next fifteen months the academy aims to be above the present national averages at GCSE, progress in English and mathematics and attendance.

Since March, good headway towards targets can be seen in improved marking and feedback to students about their work; better attendance, sixth form retention, advice and guidance; and certain improvements in lessons.

The small sample of recent work showed consistent good marking and feedback. The best feedback did four things, in a dialogue with the student resulting in better progress:

- teachers told students about strengths of the work and areas for improvement;
- comments were subject-specific rather than general encouragement or criticism;
- students took the advice, acted on it, and improved their work, either in the next pieces or by re-drafting the original piece;
- teachers corrected basic spelling and punctuation and made sure students could spell and understand key words for the subject (such as 'Versailles' in history, 'onomatopoeia' in GCSE English). In the best examples, students acted on that too.

For the sixth form, the academy has stepped up regular and systematic checks, mentoring and support if students fall behind. Students appreciate this, find it helps them keep up and avoid drop out or changing courses mid-stream. Current sixth form attendance is 94% compared with 77% at the same time last year; retention is at 96%.

Senior staff and governors are clear that information and advice should change for younger students. The best match to the needs of any individual may be at another establishment. Governors have bought in guidance from the independent Connexions Service and formed partnerships with other establishments which staff have visited and changed their teaching as a result. However, as a legacy from the past, some very small groups of two or three students remain. This does not offer variety of ways to learn and people to learn with.

In all three year groups I met, students could identify changes that made it easier to learn. They had noticed more attempts to involve them actively in groups, independent research, more demanding work in some classes for students doing well at the subject and support for those not doing well. Behaviour had improved. All students knew their personal targets. Most could describe small practical steps they could do next to improve. Some could identify work in literacy and numeracy improving their work in subjects, such as structuring essays in English and history, and graphical work in maths supporting science and geography.

However, reflecting on a typical week, students could still identify a small number of lessons not already effective or recently improved. Their experience was that in a few lessons, low level disruption like chatting over the teacher got in the way of learning, or teachers could not do what the school behaviour policy asked. This was a problem not limited to but especially for lower attaining groups and where staff were unfamiliar with the academy.

Students I met in groups and around the school were helpful and polite. They could identify readily things that had got better and they enjoyed coming to school. However, many lacked confidence in speaking at length, explaining or expanding on their views. Some could write at length, expressing their ideas well, but undersold themselves orally. Senior staff were also honest in their view that there were still considerable improvements to literacy and numeracy to be made for consistency across all subjects.

Senior staff and governors discussed these changes in a consistent way and spoke of their shared determination to carry on improving to be a good school. Governors have a firm grasp of strengths, areas for improvement and recent progress, supported by a good range of information including students' views, enabling them to question and challenge senior leaders effectively and keep close track on planned changes.

Examples of impact are the work of the special scrutiny of the sixth form set up by governors, speeding up tracking and better attendance, and the decision to re-advertise a senior appointment in light of students' views in the appointments process. Expertise on the governing body and within the sponsor enable the academy to keep up productive links with local authority schools and draw on financial and personnel advice.

Senior leaders and governors/sponsor are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection report.

The academy should take further action as listed below. These actions reflect the direction already being taken by the academy.

1. Complete work to eliminate the small amount of low level disruption and interruption to students' work in class that remains, especially for lower achieving students and where temporary staff are in place.
2. As a further check on the impact of recent improvements, map effects on the learning experience in a typical week for different groups of students, in particular the most able and for disadvantaged students.
3. As part of improvements to literacy, build in more opportunities for students to speak at length, to articulate thinking in subject lessons, and in more formal situations.
4. Refine the programme of lesson observation and improvement by focusing more on progress in different subjects. This can be supported by descriptions of good achievement and teaching for each major subject on Ofsted's website.
5. Related to these actions, I will contact the academy in September about 2013 results and to arrange joint work scrutiny focussed on literacy and progress in subjects.

Senior leaders have already arranged to attend an HMI seminar with a governor on 'getting to good' and for staff to attend mathematics and English seminars.

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 choice of external support and challenge is steered by the governors in line with the effective school development plan. The academy uses a good range of external support, well matched to need, including a school with outstanding progress in mathematics and a consultant with humanities expertise. Longer term partnership has been forged with an effective sixth form and governors employ external consultancy to report to them on data and moderate judgements about teaching and performance management. Links are kept up with the local authority through the governing body and school improvement service.

Since March, the main impact of external support is in three areas. In the sixth form, teaching and learning has become noticeably more active and engaging to students. Partnership between the local effective sixth form, the academy and St Helens College offers a solution to teaching groups in Years 12 and 13 that are too small to be sustainable longer term. Thirdly, external consultancy supports governors' independence of view, ability to challenge and speed up improvements.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the sponsor, and the Education Funding Agency with regard to the sixth form.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Comiskey

Her Majesty's Inspector