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18 June 2013

Mr Ian Young
Headteacher
Rainford High Technology College
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WA11 8NY

Dear Mr Young

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Rainford High Technology College, St. Helens

Following my visit to your school accompanied by Eileen Mulgrew HMI on 17 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 our visit. Thank you for the help you gave us 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in September 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, students, the vice chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. We also scrutinised the school's current data relating to student achievement and the quality of teaching and learning and looked at some students' books.

Context

Since the last visit the school has secured the appointment from September 2013 of an additional assistant principal with responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning.

Main findings

Your own data on levels of progress shows some improvements and the achievement gap between students eligible for free school meals and their peers is beginning to close. However, for achievement to be 'good' a significant proportion of students will need to make better than expected levels of progress across the range of subjects and the achievement gap currently evident for the more disadvantaged students needs to close rapidly. Until the summer 2013 GCSE results are published it is too early to judge whether these improvements have been secured.

You have introduced a range of initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers have attended training sessions and some have signed up to take part in the Outstanding Teacher Intervention programme. These are positive actions. However, students reported that considerable inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain. They were particularly concerned by the quality of teaching in science and where lessons were taken by cover teachers. Students were unhappy at the high proportion of lessons taught by cover teachers especially when they were aware that their teacher was in school engaged in some other activity. Students also commented on the continued inconsistencies in marking and feedback. Whereas the quality of marking in some subjects such as mathematics and geography was very high, in some subjects students waited months for feedback on homework or tests and books were rarely marked.

Although there was evidence of improvements since my previous visit, students commented on the continued poor relationships between some teachers and students which led to a poor climate for learning. All of the students spoken to referred to the existence of 'favouritism' and one commented on sexism in the different ways that boys and girls were treated by some staff, with higher expectations of boys' work and behaviour than of girls'. A further concern was the inconsistencies in communications between teachers and between teachers and students. Some students felt aggrieved that they missed out on extra-curricular opportunities or did not know where they were allowed to congregate in break times because their form tutor did not pass on whole school messages.

Although the high incidences of false fire alarms have considerably reduced, behaviour in lessons remains a concern. Students claimed that behaviour had not improved and in some cases had deteriorated since my last visit. They attributed this to a small percentage of teachers who had difficulty managing behaviour but mostly to the high prevalence of 'cover lessons' where students' behaviour was often poor. However, this was not universally the case and high praise was given to some 'cover' teachers.

Systems put in place since the last inspection to incentivise good behaviour are not valued by the students because they are inconsistently applied and the rewards for gaining high numbers of merits are not necessarily appreciated. They claimed that most students were 'embarrassed to be seen to be good' and that gaining merits sometimes resulted in students experiencing bullying. Other worrying incidents of bullying were also commented on such as that of a student in Year 8 who would not wear his glasses because of name-calling.

The school has taken on board advice from the previous monitoring visit to strengthen the student voice in the school. Those in higher year groups are very appreciative of this with one student saying it was 'a million times better'. However, this had yet to affect the lower years who have not noticed any improvements, as exemplified by a Year 8 boy who described the student council as 'woeful'.

In terms of leadership, you have taken on board some very difficult messages given at my last visit and made efforts to move on most of them. The roles of senior leaders have been clarified and a new senior appointment secured. Middle leaders have a better understanding of their roles, responsibilities and levels of accountability. However, inconsistencies in the practice of middle leaders remain, with some taking more responsibility for the performance of their teams than others. For leadership and management to be 'good' the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning need to be more consistent and rigorous at all levels; communications between staff, students and parents and carers need to improve; and members of the Governing Body need to identify opportunities to get first-hand evidence of the impact of leadership across the school.

Senior leaders, governors and the local authority are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. However, this needs to be more urgent and rigorous. The school should take further action to:

- tackle inconsistencies in teaching and learning through regular and rigorous monitoring and evaluation, including of marking
- improve communications between staff, students and parents and carers
- ensure rewards and sanctions are applied consistently and fairly
- continue to develop the student voice to include students across all groups.

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 is engaged in a number of initiatives to support schools in the region, including Rainford. It has commissioned an inspector to scrutinise schools' self-evaluation and tracking data; discussed with a senior HMI the provision of seminars for heads of mathematics and English; and organised a workshop on 'narrowing the gap'. The local authority is investigating ways to commission teachers and middle leaders from outstanding schools in other authorities to work alongside teachers and middle leaders in schools that require improvement. Much of this support is recent or pending and is yet to show that it is securing improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and students' progress at Rainford.

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer

Her Majesty's Inspector