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26 June 2013

Miss K Castrey
Headteacher
Sandon Business Enterprise and Arts College
Sandon Road
Meir
Stoke-on-Trent
ST3 7DF

Dear Miss Castrey

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sandon Business Enterprise and Arts College

Following my visit to your school on 26 June 2013, 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 May 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit I met you, one of the deputy headteachers and an assistant headteacher, the subject directors for English and mathematics, the leader of literacy across the curriculum, three members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I looked at a number of documents and evaluated the school's plan for improvement.

Context

There have been no significant changes to the school's staffing or student group since the inspection in May. Two members of the senior leadership team are due to leave at the end of this term.

Main findings

The college is well placed to continue its journey towards becoming a good school. It is clear that there has been no loss of momentum since the inspection six weeks ago when the college was found to no longer require significant improvement.

The college's action plan is tightly focused on the key things that will make a difference to outcomes for the students. The targets that have been set for students' attainment and progress and for the proportion of good and better teaching are ambitious and challenging. The plan quite rightly focuses on the need for students to make better progress than the minimum expected nationally and, as you said in discussion with me, there is no reason why every student should not make three levels of progress during their time at the college. You and the other senior leaders expect, however, that most of the students will make more progress than this. The plan also gives details of how the college's procedures and systems, for example for target-setting and for marking, will be sharpened up. All of the action to be taken links clearly with the drive to improve students' progress.

People who spoke with me were very clear that the college's focus is firmly on the progress students make, not only in individual lessons but over time and in all subjects. You have taken several steps to make sure that progress is at the forefront of everyone's minds. For example, the titles of members of the senior leadership team have been changed and include the word 'progress'. Teachers' performance targets are clearly linked to expectations for students' progress.

Senior leaders are positive and enthusiastic about this next stage in the college's development. The comprehensive timetable for monitoring and evaluation shows that a very close eye will be kept on the impact of action taken. The timetable includes a substantial amount of observation in classrooms, but you are rightly balancing the need for leaders to check that the college's systems are being followed and that the impact is showing, with the opportunity for teachers to observe and learn from one another. The information gained from lesson observations will be triangulated with that from other activities such as the scrutiny of students' work and 'progress walks'.

The governing body's role in supporting and challenging the school is being strengthened. Governors are undertaking a skills audit and a self-evaluation exercise, and an external review of governance has been commissioned for the autumn term. The governors that I spoke to were keen to make sure that all governors contribute to the college's drive for improvement. Initiatives such as the 'buddy' system for less experienced governors and the development of a pro-forma for governors' visits are positive developments. The closer involvement of governors in the college's daily life is to be welcomed, but governors must clearly understand their role when they visit lessons. They are there as governors, not senior leaders or inspectors. What governors are looking for in classrooms must be clearly defined.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- work to make sure that the college's revised systems, such as for target-setting and for marking are implemented and followed consistently by all staff
- include a target for the proportion of outstanding teaching in the improvement plan
- clarify the role that governors will play when they visit lessons.

I will visit Sandon again later in the autumn term to discuss this summer's GCSE results and to review the data about students' progress in other year groups. I would like to meet with members of the governing body to discuss the outcomes of the external review and steps that have been taken as a result. I would also like to meet with members of the senior leadership team, including newly appointed members.

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

It is clear that you and your staff are open and willing to learn from others and to work in partnership with other organisations. You are working with several local secondary schools and academies to share expertise. This is having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and leadership. I am pleased that you have agreed to participate in the West Midlands secondary literacy pilot project. This should help you to build on the good work that is already happening in English and in promoting literacy across the curriculum. You will shortly receive further information about the next steps.

The local authority provided the college with appropriate and helpful support during the time that it was judged to require significant improvement. The local authority is rightly continuing to keep an eye on the college's progress and is acting as a commissioner, for example, of the external review of governance. The local authority's representative has a good understanding of the college's strengths, areas for development and its direction of travel, and as a result is not providing extensive support.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill HMI

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – including where the school is an academy
- the academy chain where relevant
- Diocese – for voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form
- The person or body responsible for appointing foundation governors if the school has a foundation
- The lead inspector.