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Mr Joe Burns
Principal
St Peter's Academy
Queen's Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST4 7LG

Dear Mr Burns

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Peter's Academy, Stoke-On-Trent

Following my visit to your academy on 2 October 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 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 June 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, representatives of the Woodard Academies Trust Board and members of the Academy Council are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, members of your senior leadership team, students, members of the Academy Council and the Woodard Academies Trust Board and the Woodard Academy Partner to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The academy action plan, executive self-evaluation, recent monitoring data and summer 2013 achievement data were reviewed and evaluated. We toured the academy, making brief visits to a number of lessons.

Context

Since the most recent section 5 inspection, the academy has moved from the two sites it previously occupied to a single, new, purpose-built site. Two staff retired from the academy in summer 2013 and an interim head of English and a part-time music teacher took up positions at the academy in September 2013.

Main findings

Attainment data for summer 2013 shows a generally positive picture but further improvement is still required. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grade C or above, including English and mathematics rose slightly and the percentage of students gaining at least C grades at GCSE in a majority of subjects increased. English was one of the small minority of subjects where pass rates at GCSE fell. Compared to 2012, a larger percentage of students made or exceeded the progress expected of them in most subjects. The gap between the performance of boys and girls and that between the performance of students eligible for pupil premium funding and students who are not eligible is still too wide.

Leaders in the academy have analysed the data and are taking appropriate actions to bring about further improvement, particularly in English, and to close the gaps in the achievement of different groups of students. Students' targets are challenging and there are high expectations that all students can achieve well. A 'flight path' approach to monitoring students' progress has been introduced so that teachers, students and their parents can see at a glance whether students are underperforming. Regular and rigorous monitoring quickly identifies those students who are underperforming and, once identified, prompt interventions are being introduced to raise achievement.

Improving students' literacy skills is a key priority for the academy. A new literacy policy is now in place, the testing of reading across the academy is in the process of being introduced and teachers have received training on how to promote and improve literacy in their lessons. All subject teachers are now required to focus more on improving students' writing, speaking and listening, and reading skills in their lessons and the lesson observation monitoring process will be checking the quality of this on a regular basis. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this improved focus on literacy or the extent to which testing, support and monitoring of reading skills is leading to improvement for all students not just those with the lowest reading ages.

A range of strategies are in place to improve the quality of teaching. These focus not only on improving teaching that requires improvement to good but providing opportunities to enable those staff whose teaching is currently judged to be good to receive suitable support and professional development to become outstanding practitioners. Strategies include sharing best practice both within the academy and externally with other schools, coaching models of professional development and teacher development programmes. In addition, clear monitoring of teachers'

performance is routinely carried out so that early identification of underperformance in teaching and learning and in assessment and marking takes place. Personalised teacher support programmes are then put in place. There is already clear evidence that these approaches are bringing about improvement in the quality of teaching.

A strong focus on improving behaviour and attendance is already leading to improvement in these areas. A key feature of this focus is to embed a consistent approach to behaviour management by all teachers. Students say that this has not yet been fully achieved but do note that much improvement has already taken place. Students suggest that the open plan nature of the building, the fact that other students and staff are usually working in break-out areas and that all classrooms are easily visible, encourages better behaviour. They believe this is because students are more aware that any unnecessary noise they create, or off-task behaviour they engage in, is likely to disrupt other people's activities.

The move at the beginning of September to a new, purpose-built site is enabling senior and middle leaders to work more closely and more effectively together in monitoring and tracking performance and in the consistent application of academy policies. The vertical tutor system can now operate fully with students from Years 7 to 11.

Recruiting a strong head of English is an on-going problem for the academy. While it continues to advertise the post and is hopeful of appointing in time for January 2014, it has appointed an interim head of English whose particular focus is on improving the achievement of students in English and more generally in literacy.

The barrier of operating an 11-16 school on two sites almost five miles apart has now been removed. There is a clear vigour and energy in the new school. Students rate it. The principal has high expectations of what his staff and his students can achieve. He and his leadership team have ensured rigorous systems are in place to monitor performance and to deal with underperformance in relation to the quality of teaching and students' achievement. Leaders at all levels are now accountable for students' achievement and other outcomes and the management of teachers' performance is linked closely to students' achievement. There is therefore little holding St Peter's Academy back from becoming good at its next section 5 inspection.

The Academy Council plays a key role in challenging the principal and senior leaders. Members of the Council are knowledgeable about the academy's strengths and existing weaknesses. They also recognise the importance of further training for themselves, for example in relation to achievement data, in order to improve their ability to probe and ask challenging questions. There is now more clarity about their responsibilities and those of the Woodard Academies Trust Board.

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 academy receives excellent support from the Woodard Academies Trust. This includes a central programme of training and development involving focused networks that provide opportunities to discuss and share best practice and support from lead practitioners in core subjects and for data analysis. Following the decline in performance in English this year, a lead practitioner will be supporting the academy's improvement in this area. In addition, a Woodard Academy Partner provides regular challenge for academy leaders and carries out an annual review of the academy's performance with recommendations that the leaders are required to address. Additional support is provided by the Diocese of Lichfield and by local networks of school leaders and teacher development opportunities.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Woodard Academy Trust Board, the Director of Children's Services for Stoke on Trent and the DfE Academies Advisers Unit.

Yours sincerely

Gwendoline Coates

Her Majesty's Inspector