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7 October 2013

Mr Graeme Aldous
Headteacher
Hamilton Academy
Priory Avenue
High Wycombe
HP13 6SG

Dear Mr Aldous

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hamilton Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 7 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 and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The academy should take immediate action to:

- improve the learning environment for pupils on the Hampden Road site, especially in Year 2
- ensure that all pupils learn in an environment that is safe, stimulating, and organised to maximise their progress, irrespective of which site they attend
- strengthen the impact and rigour of lesson observations by making sure that they are tightly focused on what pupils are learning and that they do not reward teaching with a judgement of 'good' when learning still requires improvement for some groups of pupils
- make sure that improvement plans make clear what success will look like, by specifying how pupils' learning will improve rather than simply what teachers will do differently.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plan and read other documents related to the academy's improvement, including minutes of governing body meetings. I visited all classrooms and outdoor learning areas on both sites.

Context

Since the inspection, two newly qualified teachers have joined the academy, teaching in Reception and Year 5. The deputy headteacher has returned from maternity leave and will resume her post full time after the October half term break. Following the resignation of a Year 3 teacher, one class is taught by a Higher Level Teaching Assistant.

Main findings

Since the inspection, you have implemented a range of strategies to strengthen your evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. Many aspects of what you are doing are well focused on the right priorities. Governors are behind you. They support, but also strongly challenge what you are doing and what impact it is having. However, during this visit, a number of issues arose which call into question how effectively your actions are changing day-to-day practice.

There is a marked difference in the quality of provision experienced by pupils learning at the academy's two sites. Both sites present maintenance and access challenges, but one is far better maintained than the other. Some of the learning areas in the Hampden Road site are poorly managed, uninviting and untidy. They do not provide the bright and stimulating learning environment that all children deserve and that will help them to thrive. More seriously, a broken step had not been repaired. A temporary repair had come adrift and was causing a potential trip hazard in an area used by large numbers of pupils, including blind and partially-sighted pupils. You had this repaired during the inspection at my request and it is now safe.

The shared areas outside classrooms (the 'long rooms') provide more space than the classrooms themselves but are not organised to good effect: their use is confused, combining storage, staff work areas and pupil learning areas. Resources are badly stored and displays are out of date. Furniture is shabby. Over time, you have considered creative solutions to the use and organisation of these areas, but there is currently no medium- or long- term, plan in place for their improvement. More significantly, staff have not made enough effort to overcome the limitations of the building with bright, enticing resources and displays as they have done on the Priory Road site. Outdoor learning areas compound the issue. On the day of the inspection they looked neglected and untidy, so that there is no incentive for children using

them to develop habits of tidiness, respect for the equipment, or the social skills of managing shared resources.

The significant shortcomings to the site outlined above undermine your efforts to improve the academy because they suggest that a sense of urgency about creating high-quality learning for all children is not shared or promoted by everyone. Nonetheless, you are driving change on a number of fronts. You have increased the frequency of lesson observations this term, to give a sharper focus on what needs to improve. Records of these observations show that senior leaders are looking more closely at progress and raising questions with teachers about the achievement of different groups of pupils. However, too often, observation judgements suggest that teaching is 'good' despite also noting that some pupils have not made enough progress in the lesson. Follow-up plans are left to teachers to devise for themselves, rather than driven by senior leaders and clearly linked to a cycle of accountability and challenge.

Visits to classrooms confirm that teachers are working on mathematics terminology explicitly with children and drumming home key terms. Pupils were identifying mathematical shapes, drawing and labelling them accurately. One boy explained why his triangle was isosceles and used the term correctly. There is headway on this area for improvement, although it is too early to say whether children can use and apply mathematical terms independently and over time. Although behaviour was judged to be 'good' at the last inspection, you have kept it in focus. Your 'ready to learn' displays and reminders are helping pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning and behaviour.

The academy improvement plan has been overhauled and re-designed with the expert help of a governor. It is clear about how you intend to act on the areas for improvement identified at the time of the inspection, but not always clear enough about what success will look like in terms of children's learning and progress.

You have begun some good work to strengthen and develop the role of subject leaders in holding teachers to account and improving their practice. You are rightly determined that a wider group of leaders will contribute to the academy's improvement than just the senior team. You are considering changes to the leadership structure intended to release leaders to focus more on the quality of teaching.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. My next visit to the school will be unannounced, in order to ascertain what changes have been made to the learning environment for pupils and how well it is maintained on a daily basis.

External support

You continue to make good use of the expertise and support packages provided by Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, on behalf of the local authority. This constructive working relationship is helping the academy to address key priorities, such as by drawing on the support of a mathematics consultant. You have also set up links with an outstanding school to help develop your teachers' understanding of what good and outstanding progress look like.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector