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Tim Carroll
Headteacher
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Vandyke Road
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Dear Mr Carroll

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Vandyke Upper School and Community College

Following my visit to your school on 22 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 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 April 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

- the success of planned actions is carefully gauged in terms of their impact on students' progress and achievement;
- there is equal emphasis on securing consistently good provision and outcomes in the sixth form.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, three assistant headteachers responsible for English, mathematics and science, five middle leaders, three nominated teachers and five governors, including the Vice Chair of the Governing Body. I accompanied you on an extended learning walk, during which we observed teaching across a wide range of subjects and in different year groups. The

school's action plan was evaluated, and you took me through the school's analysis of the most recent examination results and assessment data.

Context

There have been no significant staffing changes since the last inspection, although responsibility for leading English has been reassigned to an experienced senior leader.

Main findings

Despite being very disappointed by the inspection outcome, morale is high and staff are addressing the areas for improvement determinedly and positively. Nowhere is this better exemplified than by the teachers who have participated in the 'intensive coaching programme' to strengthen their practice so that their own teaching is more consistently good.

The most recent set of examination results indicate improved achievement in 2013, despite weaker performance in some areas, for example in mathematics A level and English GCSE where moderation of the controlled assessment and recalibration of grade boundaries combined to significantly reduce students' final grades. Although the proportion of students achieving at least five A*-C GCSEs, including English and mathematics, was lower than in 2012, overall achievement is improving.

The school's action plan is detailed and well-structured so that everyone, including governors, understands their respective responsibilities. There are good systems in place to check that the school is on track, with clear milestones for the completion of planned actions; governors are closely involved in this process because they make regular visits to make first-hand observations. We discussed the need to try to evaluate the impact of planned actions on students' progress, so that staff can see when their hard work pays dividends.

Sensible steps have been taken to strengthen teaching, without the need for radical changes. There has, for example, been a sharper focus on planning specific learning objectives and outcomes for different groups in each lesson. This is underpinned by a more systematic approach to target-setting, with high expectations of the grades that students will achieve. Central to this is the school's more rigorous use of assessment. Students' attainment in English and mathematics on entry into Year 9 is carefully baselined, so that any prior or subsequent underachievement can be identified and addressed. Students know their target grades and what is expected of them. The whole-school approach to marking, which encourages students to respond, in green ink, to teachers' guidance, is effectively consolidating and accelerating students' learning. These developments are helping to maximise teachers' efforts although, as with any initiatives, some are implementing the strategies more effectively than others.

Governors contribute well to the school's improving performance. They are well-informed and demonstrate the necessary skills and commitment both to support the school and to challenge senior leaders when necessary. Governors make regular visits to ensure that they can check the reliability of what they are told.

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 school works closely with its local family of schools and has a productive working partnership with a neighbouring upper school in order to provide support for improving teaching. Although the school has no strategic partners and has no noteworthy links with the local authority, it draws on external support as it sees fit, and retains an external view of its performance through regular visits from a consultant.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Central Bedfordshire Local Authority, the Education Funding Agency and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker

Her Majesty's Inspector