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Ms Kuljit Rahelu
Principal
Bishop of Rochester Academy
Magpie Hall Road
Chatham
ME4 5JB

Dear Ms Rahelu

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Bishop of Rochester Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 11 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, governors and sponsors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- ensure that every teacher's on-going assessments of students' achievements are accurate, involving external support where necessary
- closely monitor the implementation of strategies such as those around literacy and marking
- continually check the balance between the need to bring stability and continuity to students' experiences of the academy, with the need to bring about rapid and secure improvements in provision and outcomes
- continue to capitalise on the wide range of support mechanisms established, managing their separate contributions to your work skilfully.

Evidence

During my visit, I met with you and other senior leaders, the Chair of Governors and three other governors, and representatives of the sponsors. I also had a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. I evaluated the academy's improvement plan.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the senior team has been re-structured. There are two new members: one vice principal and one assistant vice principal. The student support system has been reorganised and there are now heads of year who are qualified teachers, carrying out responsibilities previously held by support staff. Staff turn-over at the end of last year was substantial; 26 new teachers joined the academy this term.

Main findings

You and your senior management team show passion and commitment to improving this academy and raising students' achievement. You have a very clear understanding of the considerable challenges involved, and you are eager to respond to the academy's current weaknesses assertively and rapidly. Your summary action plan is well focused on securing good short-term impact in key strategies you have already put in place since the previous inspection; the main action plan contains an appropriate range of medium and long-term responses.

Examination results in 2013 were significantly lower than in 2012. This was a surprise to the academy, and to the governors and sponsors. Given the significant degree of mismatch apparent between some departments' predictions of outcomes for that cohort, and their achievements in 2013, it is reassuring to see a considerable re-working of assessment systems and a strong emphasis throughout on training for staff in this area. We agreed that accurate assessments of students' achievements by teachers, and the use of these assessments to drive planning, are crucial factors in the success of your plans. I was reassured to see that there are plans to use in-house expertise to check the quality of teachers' assessments frequently over the next year. There is, however, a need for some external validation of this work, especially in subject areas in which members of your senior team are not specialists. You are also usefully checking that there are high levels of challenge built in to all targets to ensure significant improvements in student's levels of attainment from their low starting points.

Student tracking systems were being re-worked around the time of the previous inspection and these new systems are becoming embedded. These new ways of monitoring students' progress are good, because they give all teachers and subject

leaders the capacity to identify the underperformance of individuals and groups in every subject, in every year group, quickly and easily.

You are also targeting middle leadership development appropriately strongly. There is currently a wide range of capability among heads of department to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their respective areas, and to contribute to whole-academy developments. You and your senior team, and more experienced middle leaders, are busy modelling good practice and coaching individuals to bring them to the point where all heads of department and heads of year carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively. Middle leaders are receiving good quality internal and external training, including aiming for accreditation from the chartered institute of educational assessors.

Improving students' literacy skills are a key factor in the drive to raise achievement. This is being addressed assertively and in an organised way, and literacy strategies are beginning to feature more strongly and obviously in departmental action plans and subject schemes of work. As an aspect of this, provision for students with English as an additional language is now well-organised, and good attention is also given to the literacy skills of other groups who are vulnerable to underachievement, for example those eligible for the pupil premium. You are aware that a vital aspect of this development is to monitor its successful implementation in all classrooms across the academy rigorously.

The academy has also re-worked its policy on marking and the ways in which students are given feedback on their work. There has been useful training on this already, and leaders and managers have begun to check students' work to ensure that procedures are being followed and that the new policy is making a difference.

Low overall attendance is being addressed in a number of ways. An attendance officer, employed by the academy, works closely with a Medway Education Welfare Officer. Between them they ensure the close monitoring of the attendance of individuals and groups of students, and make rapid responses to poor attendance, including using fixed penalty notices when appropriate.

The academy is superbly equipped and resourced. During my brief tour of the academy I saw calm and purposeful behaviour in classrooms; there was an atmosphere of respect for learning. There are indications of your success in addressing more serious behaviour problems: the previously high number of exclusions is decreasing, for example. I visited the alternative provision on a site near the academy where some Year 10 students, who sometimes find the formality of the working environment in the academy too much of a challenge, were busily and happily working on their BTEC construction course.

You correctly identified that what the academy most needs at this time is to balance the need for stability, given the academy's very turbulent recent history, and the need to generate rapid and sustainable improvements in students' achievements. The senior team has already begun to work together achieve the targets on the action plan; you and your team show high levels of understanding about the need to maintain morale and to enable everyone to both challenge the status quo, and be challenged, but feel well-supported and part of a strong team.

Governors are strengthening their capacity to provide good challenge and support for the academy. Relationships between sponsors and the governing body have been strained in the past, but there is an understanding of the need for these bodies to work in partnership. All three sponsors work closely together and are therefore able to offer challenge and support to the governing body which, in turn, do this for the academy. Governors have already commissioned a review of their effectiveness, as a means to identify further improvements, and are currently acting on the outcomes.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The academy benefits considerably from the individual and collective support of its three sponsors. Canterbury Christ Church University provides very good assistance with the staff training strategy: you work with them closely and effectively, to identify, plan and structure training in the academy, and to identify the need to find external training providers when necessary. This involves support for the development of middle leaders, and the chance to be involved in opportunities such as the improving teachers programme. The university also provides valuable support in your efforts to raise aspirations among sixth form students, and their parents, by opening their eyes to the opportunities presented by higher education and assisting them with the process of application.

The diocese provides valuable support for the academy's Christian ethos, and support for governor training, as well as facilitating connections with a network of other schools, locally and further afield. Relations with the local authority have been less fruitful in the past, but there is a clear willingness on their part, and from you, to develop closer links and to work together more productively. The local authority is usefully represented on the on the governing body.

You orchestrate this support, and your links with the London leadership partnership, and the local teaching alliance, very well.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector