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27 November 2013

Jonathan Dennett
Headteacher
Fitzharrys School
Northcourt Road
Abingdon
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Dear Mr Dennett

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Fitzharrys School

Following my visit to your school on 26 November 2013 I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in October 2012. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is not making enough progress towards the removal of the serious weakness designation.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire and as below.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2012

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons so that by the summer of 2013, all teachers throughout the school are consistently:
 - using questioning more effectively to challenge and engage students and encourage them to develop their reasoning and extend their thinking
 - making sure that work in lessons stretches, enthuses and absorbs students
 - helping students to rely less on adults and encouraging them more often to work out their own answers to questions and problems.
- Increase the rate of progress made by students throughout the school, and particularly in mathematics, by ensuring there is greater emphasis on:
 - probing the progress made by boys and ensuring that they are fully engaged on tasks that are at the right level of difficulty for them
 - checking more regularly in lessons that students understand the skills and concepts being taught and encouraging students to give fuller answers in discussions.
- Broaden and embed the effectiveness of leadership and management beyond the senior leadership team by:
 - ensuring that lesson observations by middle leaders place a consistent emphasis on speeding up the pace of students' learning and checking to see how well students understand their work
 - strengthening the effectiveness and rigour of the tracking of students' progress in the sixth form, especially for students in their first year
 - using good teachers and effective middle leaders as role models for spreading good practice
 - undertaking a review of governance in order to enhance the capability of the whole governing body to hold the school to account for examination performance and the quality of teaching.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on Tuesday 26 November 2013

Evidence

The inspector met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, a group of students, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the headteacher of Faringdon Community College. She also held a telephone discussion with a consultant supporting the school and funded by the local authority. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate how far actions taken by school leaders are reflected in improved achievement and in learning and progress in lessons. The inspector observed learning in 12 lessons, accompanied by the headteacher or assistant headteacher. She also read a range of documents related to school improvement.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, eight new members of staff have joined the school. An assistant headteacher with responsibility for improving teaching and learning has been appointed to the senior leadership team. Two members of the English department and the head of drama are on maternity leave and their work is covered by temporary appointments.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Senior leaders, including governors, understand and accept the school's weaknesses. They are focused on the right priorities, but their actions are not having a strong enough impact on improving classroom practice. As a result, achievement is not rising fast enough and teaching is not yet good enough to make sure that all groups of students are making better and rapid progress. In spring 2013, external reviews reported improving teaching and were optimistic about future outcomes. However, a subsequent review conducted in September and October 2013 found that improvements had not been sustained or embedded, and that too much teaching still required improvement. The findings of this inspection visit concur with the later reviews.

Following the last monitoring visit, the governing body undertook a full review of governance in partnership with Faringdon Community College, a designated national support school. This thorough and comprehensive review helped to strengthen governors' understanding of their roles. Committees are more efficiently run and more sharply focused on the key priorities of the school improvement plan. Governors are reflective and actively seek to improve their skills through regular training and on-going review. They have supported the headteacher in challenging weak teaching and in ensuring that it is not inappropriately rewarded with pay progression. The Chair of the Governing Body acknowledges, however, that the school is not improving fast enough.

GCSE results in 2013 showed some improvement, notably a rise in mathematics, showing the impact of stronger subject leadership and more stable staffing. The proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or higher also improved. However, it remains well below the 2012 national average and shows that students are still not making enough progress from their broadly average starting points. This is particularly true for boys in English, whose progress was significantly below expectations. About one third of students eligible for free school meals and supported by pupil premium funding made the expected progress in English; a slightly higher proportion in mathematics. This is similar to the previous year and does not demonstrate enough improvement for this group. The school's analysis of A- and AS-level results points to improvements, such as an increase in higher grades at AS level, but the picture is mixed and too variable. Some bright students did not achieve as highly as they should have done, especially in science subjects. Achievement overall at AS level is still significantly below average.

Senior leaders have improved how they use assessment information to track students' progress. They acknowledge the weaknesses in the 2013 examination outcomes but predict much stronger results for 2014 and beyond, including accelerated progress for students eligible for the pupil premium. Although the headteacher points to an accurate track record of predicting results, progress in lessons is not good enough to suggest that these estimates are totally secure.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Attendance is rising because strategies to raise students' awareness of the impact of absence on achievement and to promote positive attitudes to school and to learning are working.
- There is evidence in some lessons of teachers acting on advice and training, for example by checking understanding at key points throughout the lesson.
- Teachers in English are planning lessons together to make sure that, even with staffing turbulence in the department, students are still experiencing continuity in their learning.
- Students like the improved system for behaviour management and say that it works well when teachers stick to it.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teachers are not responding with sufficient urgency to the need for improvement. There is too much variation in the quality, quantity and presentation of work in students' books because teachers are not consistently expecting high standards of work from all students.
- Senior leaders and governors are having to reassert expectations, for example of standards in marking, because they have not been met and maintained.
- Despite better availability of assessment information, some lesson planning is barely adequate, because it has not taken account of students' individual needs, or their current and predicted levels and grades.

- Students' understanding of their levels, grades and targets varies from subject to subject and class to class.
- Too few teachers target their questions to develop individual understanding, or probe students' answers to demand more depth and detail.
- Marking varies in quality, within and across departments. Not all heads of subject set a high enough standard or hold teachers strongly to account for the quality of written feedback they offer students. The 'triple impact' marking policy is ineffective because some teachers do not ensure it is completed or followed up.
- Senior leaders evaluate behaviour and safety as good, but students report some disruption to lessons and this is raised in external reviews as a concern, linked to weaker teaching.
- Senior leaders' analysis of the school's performance too often focuses on the positives and loses sight of the bigger picture, which is that teachers are not implementing the necessary changes quickly or reliably.

External support

The school continues to receive support from a school improvement consultant, funded by the local authority and from the headteacher of Faringdon Community College, funded by the National College for Teaching and Leadership. Both partners help to sharpen the school's analysis of its performance. Their collective review of progress in the autumn term is keenly focused on the quality of teaching and learning and rightly concludes that it is not improving fast enough. The local authority statement of action, which was not fit for purpose at the time of the first monitoring visit, has since been improved, with tighter timescales and a clearer picture of what success will look like. However, evaluation of success against the plan by school leaders is overgenerous.