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11 December 2013

Mr Glyn Whiteford
The Headteacher
Denefield School
Long Lane
Tilehurst
Reading
Berkshire
RG31 6XY

Dear Mr Whiteford

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Denefield School

Following my visit to your school on 10 December 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 December 2012. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

I recommend that the next inspection of the school is a full section 5 re-inspection.

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 and the Director of Children's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching to good across the whole school, including the sixth form, by ensuring that all teachers:
 - plan work that will stretch the most-able students, without always expecting them to work through easy tasks before they get on to more difficult activities
 - provide constructive written feedback to students that shows them how to improve, drawing on the good practice that exists in several classes
 - encourage students to reflect on their learning and respond to the written feedback in books.
- Improve students' attainment and progress in mathematics in Key Stages 3 and 4 by ensuring that:
 - teaching is consistently good with, in addition to points above, more time for students to work at their own pace and level
 - teachers are more alert to students' difficulties in lessons and find ways to help them and build their confidence
 - all students have a good knowledge of number facts such as the times tables, so that they can tackle problems more easily and more confidently.
- Improve the effectiveness of the way that the school is led and managed by:
 - ensuring that students are given extra support where needed in mathematics from Year 7
 - using more challenging targets for improving teaching
 - sharing more widely across subjects and year groups the very good practice that exists.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10 December 2013

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, groups of students and members of the governing body. Ten lessons were observed jointly with members of the leadership team. The visit was undertaken to check on the school's progress since the last visit, in February 2013, particularly the impact of the work being done to improve teaching.

Context

There have been no significant changes since the last monitoring inspection.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The school's improvement is being well led. The school's leaders have a good understanding of the school and what needs to be done to make improvements. Effective leadership is leading to clear improvements in teaching and achievement. GCSE examination results went up in 2013. There were significant improvements in English and mathematics; a much higher proportion of students gained five or more A* to C grades, including these subjects. Notably, the gap between the attainment of students eligible for free school meals and other students was smaller than for most secondary schools, both nationally and across the southeast. There is now much more good teaching.

At the time of the first visit the academy's action plan met requirements, but the targets in the plan lacked detail. More detailed targets are now in place. These identify how good teaching and achievement should be at different points in the year. This is helping leaders and governors to check whether the school is on track to make the necessary progress.

Poor performance in mathematics was one of the main reasons why the school was judged to have serious weaknesses. Despite their best efforts, leaders were unable to recruit a head of mathematics. They therefore arranged for the head of science to take over the leadership of mathematics. This has been very successful. Under her leadership, both the quality of teaching and the achievement of students in mathematics have improved significantly.

Governors tenaciously and confidently challenge the school's leaders. They have a good understanding of the information about the school, for example the levels of student achievement and the quality of teaching. A special group of governors has been set up to monitor and check the school's improvement; they keep a sharp eye on the progress being made against the targets in the action plan.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Senior leaders visit lessons regularly to check on the quality of teaching. They judge the quality accurately and analyse the strengths and weaknesses well. In many cases they undertake lesson observations jointly with subject leaders to train them and check their judgements about their departments. The results of lesson monitoring are analysed carefully and presented clearly.
- Leaders' monitoring of lessons usefully focuses on four key aspects of teaching. This helps leaders to identify weaknesses in individual teachers' work and in teaching more generally across the school. Good use is made of this information to guide the school's plans for training and support for teachers.
- A wide range of support is provided for teachers, carefully tailored to their current abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Good practice is being shared more effectively; much of the training for teachers is now being provided by the school's good or outstanding practitioners.
- Teachers whose teaching is less than good are provided with intensive training and support to help them to improve. Robust action is taken to deal with any persistently ineffective teaching.
- Individual teachers' targets are now much sharper and more challenging.
- Marking and feedback to students have improved. Teachers typically follow the school policy and guidelines for marking, and work is generally marked regularly. Teachers now follow up to ensure that students respond to what they have written.
- The school's leaders and governors set challenging targets for students and monitor their progress carefully. Information about students' achievement is analysed carefully and presented clearly. This is helping leaders and governors to measure and evaluate the school's progress.
- Effective management of behaviour and student attendance has led to further improvements in these areas. Attendance rates are now above average. Students typically behave well in lessons and around the school. The number of exclusions has fallen.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- An educational consultant visits the school to check on progress. He attends meetings of the governors' improvement group and provides valuable advice and guidance on school improvement. However, leaders and governors have not commissioned him to produce a more formal written evaluation of the school's progress.
- There is still variability in the quality of teaching. In some cases students do not achieve as much as they could in the time available. This sometimes happens when teachers help and support individual students, but do not keep a close enough eye on what others are doing. This allows some students to drift off task and means that some do not push themselves to do as much as they could.

Students are also sometimes given too long to complete a task and time is then wasted.

- Some teachers do not make good use of questioning in their teaching. They ask only very simple questions or do not push students to expand and improve their answers.
- Teachers now generally follow up to ensure that students respond to the comments that they make when they mark their work. However, in some cases, students' responses are rather cursory.

External support

The school benefits from an appropriate range of support. The school commissions a number of consultants to visit the school to offer help and advice, or to check on progress. There are also a number of useful links with other schools, including one set up to support sixth form developments. This has helped leaders to analyse the reasons for the dip in the A-level results and to plan for future improvements in sixth form provision.