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17 January 2014

Jeremy Whelan
Fearnhill School
Icknield Way West
Letchworth
SG6 4BA

Dear Mr Whelan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Fearnhill School

Following my visit to your school on 16 January 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. 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 September 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. The school should take further action to:

- use the full range of evidence that you are gathering to provide a clearer view of the quality of teaching over time and to inform the next steps for improvement.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, students, 10 members of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated. I analysed and discussed with you the data the school collects on attendance, exclusions and students' progress. We jointly observed teaching and learning in four lessons.

Context

Since the last inspection, two additional deputy headteachers and an assistant headteacher have been seconded from other schools to strengthen the capacity of the senior team.

Main findings

Students are clear that the teaching they receive is of a more consistent quality. This is the result of clear guidance on what is expected, good sharing of best practice and regular monitoring by leaders. Successful strategies in art lessons, that have raised standards and increased the proportion of top grades at GCSE, are now evident in other subject areas. These include the way the objectives for the lesson are set and shared with students and how best to challenge students that are more able. The way teachers mark students' work is much more helpful. Students receive better guidance on how to improve. Teachers provide more opportunities for students to enter into a dialogue with them and show they understand. Students confirm that this is helping to raise their aspirations.

Standards are rising. The gaps in the progress made by different groups are closing. Boys still perform less well than girls, but improvements are evident. Carefully targeted intervention work is proving effective. Seating plans allow boys and girls to learn from each other. Where strategies have proved effective in Year 11, they are being extended into Year 10. The achievement of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, along with that of those eligible for the Pupil Premium is also improving but remains too low.

You and the other leaders in the school have ensured that you check the quality of teaching regularly, both through formal lesson observations and less formal learning walks. You use this information well to identify and share good practice. Action plans have targets for the proportion of good or better lessons, but do not use the informal evidence you gather to contribute to the evaluation of teaching over time and allow a more rapid increase in consistency. A major improvement is evident in the way the school presents and uses data on students' progress to increase the effectiveness of the school's work and raise standards. Governors have benefitted from training and as a result, they are knowledgeable, challenging and supportive. The action plan indicates which aspects they will monitor and evaluate, but would benefit from giving a clearer indication of the type of activities they will carry out in order to do so.

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 local authority is providing generous and well-targeted support for the school. They are supporting improvements through subject consultants and brokered the supportive partnership with a successful local school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire County Council.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector