

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5359

Direct F 0117 315 0430

Email: christina.bannerman@tribalgroup.com

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Alan Streeter
Executive Headteacher
Phoenix High School
The Curve
London
W12 0RQ

Dear Mr Streeter

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Phoenix High School

Following my visit to your school on 10 February 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 November 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:

- sustain its strong focus on literacy, while also ensuring sufficient emphasis on how well students apply their mathematical skills across the curriculum
- agree as soon as practicable a link with a good or outstanding school or academy to share and learn from best practice.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and other leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, two other governors, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the post-inspection action plan and read other relevant documentation. We briefly visited some lessons focussing on the impact of school's actions to improve the quality of marking and the development of students' literacy skills.

Context

Since the previous inspection three teachers have left. An assistant headteacher has been appointed as director of English and will take up this post in April 2014.

Main findings

School leaders, other staff and governors share your passion and determination to bring about improvement with measured urgency. You are instrumental in setting high expectations and direction. Along with other leaders and governors, you recognise rightly that there is much to be done. Some of the changes you are making will not have an immediate impact. For instance, very positive changes to the curriculum will take time to have full effect. You are all determined to make changes which will bring about longer-term improvement rather than quick-fix solutions which may not be sustainable.

The school's post-Ofsted action plan is well structured and clear. Your attendance, along with the Chair of the Governing Body at a 'getting to good' seminar helped you refine and sharpen it. The plan is closely aligned with the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection. Early impact can be seen in key areas such as the emphasis on correct spelling, punctuation and grammar by staff and students alike. There are explicit success criteria in the plan and very clear markers set down for improvements in English and mathematics.

Your passion for improving literacy across the curriculum is palpable and is at the heart of the school's drive to becoming good. There is a strong focus in helping students improve their literacy skills in different subjects and on getting the basics right. This includes good presentation, opportunities to write more and at greater length, the understanding of key words and how to apply and spell them correctly. You place equal importance on ensuring that staff model the best practice in literacy, and this will be a key focus of the staff training day on 14 February. The school is successfully cultivating the enjoyment of reading by students. The school is right in giving such prominence to literacy. The development of mathematical skills across the curriculum was not a specific area for improvement and as a consequence, it features less prominently in the school's post-inspection plan. It is important to give sufficient emphasis to this aspect of their learning, given that the mathematics faculty is relatively new and further work is needed to increase the proportion of students making expected levels of progress by the end of Year 11.

Along with other leaders you ensure that there is greater consistency in the quality of teaching and in how other interventions are being used effectively. Lesson planning is simple and consistent, with a strong emphasis on key fundamentals. You set clear expectations for staff around how they set work that is pitched at the right level for different learners. You place strong emphasis on ensuring that teachers provide the right kind of feedback to students. The quality of marking is improving and is helping students' understanding of what to do next. However, it is not of a consistently high quality.

Leaders have tightened the systems for the quality assurance of departments. As a result, there is greater accountability for improvement, particularly of middle leaders. Leaders are placing equal importance on the quality of day-to-day teaching in the classroom and the impact of other interventions, for example with students who have special educational needs or those who speak English as an additional language. Leaders assess the impact of the action plan through regular learning walks, work scrutiny and analysis of detailed performance data. Departmental reviews provide an accurate evaluation of strengths and areas for development, and are having an impact. In the sixth form, for instance, staff are following up performance with individual students at each assessment point and helping them identify what steps they need to take to move it up a notch. The commitment and dedication of the staff to improving their own practice through coaching and training is particularly noteworthy. This can be seen, for instance, in the large proportion of staff attending Saturday sessions.

The school has now set up a school improvement board, chaired by a governor. This ensures that the governing body is closely linked with the improvements which are being made and can hold leaders to account. Governors play an active part in school improvement, for instance in the contribution to departmental reviews. The governing body sets high expectations for your performance and that of other leaders, and set clear targets shaped by the findings of the last inspection.

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 harnesses much of its support from within its own resources, for instance in coaching and mentoring. It also draws from the valuable links with the PiXL Club and the West London Teaching Alliance. This helps leaders to benefit from sharing best practice. The local authority continues to provide valuable, effective and focussed support, particularly through its linked adviser. She provides an accurate and appropriately challenging external perspective. Discussions are underway to broker links with a suitable school or academy to learn from its strengths as well as to work on ideas together. However, there has been a delay in finalising this.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hammersmith and Fulham and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

John Kennedy
Her Majesty's Inspector