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Deborah Warwick
Principal
Francis Combe Academy
Horseshoe Lane
Garston
Watford
WD25 7HW

Dear Ms Warwick

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Francis Combe Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 5 March 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 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 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 academy should take further action to:

- ensure that the quality of leadership at subject and year leader level is consistently good so that these colleagues hold their teams of staff fully to account for the high standards you have set
- ensure that the quality of teachers' marking, and the quality of students' responses to teachers' comments, are as good as the very best.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you and the Vice Principal, two members of the governing body, a group of students as well as a headteacher and consultant

headteacher who are providing external support, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plan. I visited a small number of lessons, accompanied by you, to look at the quality of teaching over time and the marking of students' books. I also looked at the academy's record of recruitment checks on staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection you have very recently been appointed as Principal of the academy. Two former members of the academy leadership team have stepped down, but continue to work in the academy.

Main findings

Your academy improvement plan includes sets out suitable actions to tackle the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. It is clear how you will measure the success of your planned actions and how often. You provided me with a detailed document on the impact of the actions you have taken so far in your drive to raise standards in the academy.

You have reviewed your targets for English and mathematics for students in Key Stage 3, so that they are more challenging, and you express confidence in the judgement of the mathematics subject leader of the progress being made towards achieving these targets. When we visited lessons together, you demonstrated a sound understanding of what good and better teaching looks like over time and what weaker teachers need to do to improve their practice. Your evidence demonstrates that the quality of teaching is improving. Consequently, you are forecasting an improvement in students' outcomes in Year 11 in 2014, with the gap in attainment for students who receive pupil premium and other students closing.

You have introduced a new system for marking which requires helpful comments from teachers and meaningful responses from students to their teachers' guidance. My visits to lessons and my discussions with students indicate that while there are some teachers and students who have quickly adapted to this new style of marking, others are not yet responding to the marking policy in the way you would like.

Your systems for monitoring the performance of the academy are becoming more refined and indicate a decrease in the number of behavioural incidents and fixed-term exclusions. At the same time, students' attendance has improved compared to the same time last year.

You and other senior leaders are working closely with subject and year leaders to ensure they become more accountable for their areas of responsibility. This includes involving them more in checking the quality of teaching and driving improvements.

Members of the governing body have a good understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and demonstrate a sound awareness of the performance of different groups of students, including those who receive pupil premium. They monitor the work of the academy through scheduled visits which are followed up by a report and points for action.

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

You have worked productively with a consultant headteacher who has added additional capacity to the leadership team and who is coaching you and other senior leaders effectively. You have also drawn on the support of the Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire Teaching Alliance to share good practice, particularly in English and science. Both colleagues with whom I met commented positively on your ability to identify good aspects of leadership and to apply those which are most relevant to your own academy.

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

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector