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Scott Preston
Headteacher
Ernulf Academy
Barford Road
Eynesbury
St Neots
PE19 2SH

Dear Mr Preston

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Ernulf Academy

Following my visit to your school on 25 February 2014, 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 June 2013. 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.

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 Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Peter Limm
Additional Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2013

- Improve teaching and students' achievement, particularly in mathematics, in the main school and the sixth form by making sure that:
 - work in lessons is always well matched to the different skills and abilities of all students
 - students' work is marked regularly, with targets to help improve the work that are checked by teachers to make sure students respond to the advice given
 - teachers spend less time providing introductions and explanations, so students can work more on their own
 - teachers use different types of questions more effectively to help students of different abilities to develop their understanding.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - reviewing the priorities in the academy's improvement plan, so they can be clearly monitored against their impact on the quality of teaching and achievement at key points throughout the year
 - developing the skills of those responsible for leading subjects so that teaching and achievement in all subjects are consistently and accurately monitored
 - devising a system for all teachers and leaders to share good practice in a coordinated way.

- Make sure the governing body is better able to influence improvements in teaching and achievement by:
 - providing governors with regular, more detailed information about the quality of teaching and achievement
 - regularly and thoroughly checking this information at governing body meetings against the objectives in the academy improvement plan.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 25 February 2014

Evidence

I met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, the headteacher of the partner academy, and the Chair of the Governing Body. I also spoke to three groups of students. I undertook joint observations of five part lessons with members of the senior team and we looked at the students' books when in class. I also scrutinised documentation to show evidence of the work taken to improve standards, achievement and the quality of teaching. These included attendance figures and the latest information about the progress students are making. I also looked at reports of visits made by external advisers and the interim report of the consultant undertaking the review of the governing body. The single central record, which confirms that safeguarding checks have been made on new staff, was examined.

Context

In order to clarify and strengthen the accountability structure of the St Neots Learning Partnership, the headteacher has been made a joint executive principal with the headteacher of the nearby partner academy. Both remain headteachers of their respective academies. One teacher has left the school and not been replaced. There is a new teacher for the under-five provision linked to the academy. Five non-teaching staff have left.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The headteacher and senior leaders have continued to consolidate the improvement initiatives which they had begun to introduce at the time of the previous monitoring visit. Their clear understanding of what has to be achieved is resulting in further improvements which are beginning to lead to more rapid rates of student progress, especially in English and mathematics. Although students' attainment is not strong in the sixth form, students nevertheless make good progress given their attainment on entry to courses.

The headteacher has ensured that data tracking is more rigorous and is being used more accurately by teachers to assess how well students are making progress to achieve their targets. This tighter focus on students' progress has enabled teachers to provide more timely and appropriate help and support for those who are at risk of falling behind. However, although students for whom the academy receives pupil premium funding are making better progress than last year, there is still a gap in attainment with other students.

The emphasis upon improving the quality of teaching and learning has meant that the latest results for students entered early for mathematics and English GCSEs demonstrate a marked improvement on those for summer 2013. Teacher

assessments and predictions, usually accurate in the past, indicate students are now making much better progress in the core subjects and across the academy. Although the most-able students are beginning to achieve more higher grades, there is still underachievement for some gifted students.

Senior leaders are monitoring the quality of teaching carefully. They regularly make visits to lessons, look at agreed themes and have undertaken rigorous checking of students' work. Heads of department are being held much more accountable for the quality of teaching in their subjects. The judgements of senior leaders on the quality of teaching seen in lessons observed on the monitoring visit agreed with mine. The quality of teaching is improving well for this stage of the monitoring process.

The governing body is being reviewed and the initial report indicates that governors continue to respond well to the findings of the previous inspection. Governors have strengthened their ability to hold the academy to account by improving further their use of data and engaging fully in operational and strategic issues. The governing body is acutely aware of the likely effects of projected reductions in Ernulf's budget and is determined to seek ways of minimising these effects in order not to undermine the improvements being achieved since the last inspection.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Following the establishment of the joint executive principal structure, the partnership has broadened its cross-academy support arrangements and brokered wider support from external consultants and other partnerships. This is strengthening the way the academy is monitoring and reviewing the key areas for development in its planning, and how it is held to account by the joint governing body and headteacher of the partner academy.
- As a result of training, teachers' awareness and understanding of what is required to improve attainment and increase the rate of progress students make, have deepened. The 'moving to good' training programme used by the academy is helping to increase the proportion of teaching that senior leaders judge to be good or better. The rigorous work scrutiny undertaken by subject leaders sharpened their understanding of how inconsistencies in marking can lead to slower student progress.
- Students are much clearer about what they need to do in lessons as teachers have improved their guidance and instructions at the beginning of activities. Students know what levels they are working at and how far they have to go to achieve their end-of-course targets.
- More teachers are asking questions which make the students think carefully before offering answers.

- There has been a strong focus on improving attendance and the figures demonstrate that this has resulted in good attendance and better punctuality to lessons.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- There is still too much inconsistency to the marking of students' books. Two students said that, even where they were praised for good work with a 'well done' comment, it would have been better if teachers could inform them how to make even more improvements to their work.
- Teachers do not have high enough expectations of the way in which students present their work in books. Although some work was of good quality, some was not, with incomplete sentences and gaps where work had been missed. It was clear that, as the academic year progressed, the work of some students deteriorated, which indicates they did not have much pride in their work.
- The monitoring pro forma used by senior staff for undertaking lesson observations lacks sufficient emphasis on what students are doing as a consequence of teaching.
- Teachers do not always probe students' understanding effectively with their questioning. They sometimes accept, and over-praise, answers which are only basic and do not explain in any detail how the students arrived at them.
- In some lessons, the most-able students are not challenged sufficiently to demonstrate their ability to work through suitably difficult tasks, or to write in more depth when communicating their thoughts and ideas.

External support

The academy has benefitted from good support and guidance from its partner academy and also from a partnership of secondary schools in Huntingdonshire. This latter link has provided good consultant support for enhancing the work of middle managers and improving the rigour of book scrutinies. The local authority still provides good support when requested. The academy has also had a detailed review of governance from a National Leader of Governance, and senior middle leaders have completed tailored middle leader courses provided by the Eastern Leadership Centre. Links are developing well with a high-performing local independent school.