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Mrs R Robinson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Robinson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Swindon Academy

Following my visit to your school on 21 January 2014 with my colleague Ken Buxton HMI, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave us 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 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.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, senior and middle leaders of all phases of the school. I undertook a 'learning walk' with two subject leaders, listened to the views of a group of students, and inspected a sample of books from a range of years and subjects in the senior school. My colleague undertook a 'learning walk' with leaders of the primary phase, looked at books, and listened to the views of a group of students in the primary phase.

In addition, we investigated the school's externally published data, along with internal records and reports on the quality of teaching, students' progress and behaviour, the curriculum, leadership and management. The links between the primary and secondary phases, and the impact of external support in helping the school to improve, were also scrutinized.

Context

Since the last inspection there have been considerable changes in staffing; 28 new teachers. A new primary headteacher took up her post in September 2013, along with six curriculum leaders in the secondary phase.

Main findings

The quality and quantity of feedback to students has improved. Students reported that they knew their individual targets and were increasingly confident about what they needed to do to improve. This improvement was also seen in students' books. Nevertheless, the quality of work in some books is not of a high enough standard.

During the 'learning walks' attractive displays and other resources were used by teachers to help improve the progress that students were making. The school has appointed high quality, well qualified staff to support learning in the classrooms. In the parts of lessons seen, teachers were making good use of the additional adults. They were frequently seen helping individual students learn through careful questioning and explanation.

The termly use of 'mock' exams for older students and robust tests for younger ones has helped leaders and managers, at all levels, to have a more accurate picture of teaching and the progress that students make over time. This information is then being used wisely by teachers to plan subsequent lessons to help resolve students' misinterpretation of questions and identify gaps in previous learning. This is helping to increase the rate of progress that students are making.

Both inspectors judged that significant improvements have been made in students' behaviour and attitudes to learning. This is demonstrated through the orderly classrooms and general movement around the school. This improvement has been brought about by staff having high expectations for all students and the insistence that everyone complies with behaviour policies and procedures. Significantly, there has been a dramatic reduction of exclusions and incidents of poor behaviour, particularly in the primary phase. The attendance and punctuality rates have increased, although the school is clear that these improvements need to be sustained. During the 'learning walks', inspectors noted that students were attentive in lessons and focused on learning. The students that talked with inspectors reported that the code of conduct was being applied consistently by staff and that they felt safe. Importantly, they were also confident that any bullying or potential bullying concerns were quickly sorted out, and that there were far fewer occasions when students were off task. Students clearly understand the link between the 'Reward Trip' and the 'Student Tracker'. They felt that it encouraged them to try their best so that they could go on the trip with their peers.

Good quality training programmes for all staff and close links with outstanding schools have increased their understanding of what needs to be done and how change can be achieved successfully. The closely integrated plans and monitoring

systems ensure that all staff are held to account for their area(s) of responsibility. This includes staff being held to account for the progress of the students that they teach.

There have been significant improvements to the curriculum. Links with Marlborough College have increased the opportunities for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students at both schools. Residential trips in England and abroad are raising students' awareness of other cultures and lifestyles, helping to breakdown potential stereotypes. The school has successfully introduced potentially contentious issues into the curriculum to raise students' awareness of how their lifestyle differs from those from other cultures.

There is a coherent and consistent approach to driving school improvements at all levels and across the different phases of the school. Links and the support for students moving from primary schools to the secondary school have improved. The middle leaders have far higher aspirations for students' attainment and are more able to challenge and support the performance of the staff who report to them. Staff have responded well to this challenge, morale is high and there is a palpable determination to make Swindon Academy an outstanding school.

Leaders of both phases are knowledgeable and experienced. They have a comprehensive awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their own areas of responsibility and how these are reflected and impact across the school as a whole. This is demonstrated by their knowledge and understanding of data and willingness to try new initiatives when improvements are not fast enough. For example, in the primary phase they noted that students could not read well enough and improvements were too slow with the strategy the school was using. As a result, a new initiative introduced to develop reading skills has led to an increased rate of learning and is being beneficial in other subject areas.

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 been pro-active in seeking high quality external support from a wide variety of sources and external agencies. External and internal training has been tightly focussed on the key aspects that need to improve, and sustain, the outcomes for students; more is planned. The increased level of support and coaching is steadily increasing the expertise within the school. This allows you, with the support of the school leaders and governing body, to set the appropriate priorities for improvement.

Yours sincerely

Steffi Penny
Her Majesty's Inspector