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Michael Jones
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Jones

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Holmer Green Senior Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 25 April 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 January 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The academy should take immediate action to:

- implement an external review of governance so that the governing body understands better how to improve its own effectiveness as well as that of the academy overall
- allocate interim responsibilities urgently, and robustly evaluate the actions taken, to ensure that the required improvements are not slowed or inhibited by structural change to the academy's leadership
- sharpen improvement planning so that it shows more clearly what success will look like in terms of students' learning and progress
- work with the school improvement partner to sharpen judgements about the quality of teaching and make sure that they arise from a wider range of evidence of the impact of teaching on learning over time.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the Chair of the Governing Body, the School Improvement Partner, a deputy headteacher, and the subject leader and second in charge of the English department, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plan and read other documentation related to improvement, such as governing body minutes and notes of visit by the school improvement partner. I checked the accessibility of the academy's complaints procedures and information on the academy website about the governing body.

Context

Plans for the reorganisation of the senior leadership team, drawn up prior to the inspection, have since been implemented. Two members of the senior team will leave the academy at the end of May. The leadership structure now includes a specialist lead role in English, but you have not yet recruited to this post. A new Chair of the Governing Body has been in post for about three weeks. You have commissioned a new and experienced school improvement partner.

Main findings

You have correctly identified that rapid improvement in the core subjects of English and mathematics is key to the academy's overall effectiveness. This belief underpins the re-organisation of the senior leadership team. This re-structuring process, however, is incomplete, and it is not yet possible to determine whether it will have the desired impact on student achievement. In fact, it has shifted the focus away from key areas for improvement and left a temporary gap in the leadership of key recommendations, such as improving writing across the academy.

Governors understand and fully accept their role in driving improvement. There is expertise and experience on the governing body that is potentially very powerful in identifying priorities and making changes. However, governors have not undertaken an external review of their work, as recommended. This means that they have not benefitted from an objective evaluation of how they work and, in particular, how they can hold you to account for the achievement of different groups of students.

You are improving the use of student assessment information, to help teachers know how individuals and groups are doing and when to intervene to prevent slippage against targets. For example, examination outcomes show wide variation in achievement in English by students eligible for free school meals. These inconsistencies have emerged without senior or middle leaders having anticipated them or intervened. Current leaders in English are unclear about how well this group of students is achieving in all year groups, although they have a better understanding of how well the GCSE cohort is doing.

Improvement planning in English is not strategic or wide-ranging enough. It does not demonstrate how improvement will be secured for all, or embedded beyond the short term. It is not clear how the subject leader monitors and evaluates the quality of teaching, or seeks to improve it. There is inconsistent practice in marking, feedback and assessment. Some English books have not been marked since October; there is too often no clear link between targets and the marking in books, which shows a mix of approaches, some more effective than others. There is better and more consistent practice elsewhere, such as in mathematics and some history and geography books. However, not enough has been done to capture and spread the best practice in the academy. Students are keen to discuss their work, but too often unclear about how they are doing or how to improve.

Sixth form courses have been rationalised for the coming year, to help students achieve well on courses better matched to their needs and ability levels. This has caused disappointment, especially amongst prospective AS level science candidates, whose courses will not now run. Your intention is to concentrate the academy's efforts on courses with a good track record and to re-build and reinstate courses only where they are viable and can be taught effectively. We agreed that it is critical, meantime, that students receive clear and impartial advice about where else they can successfully pursue their chosen courses.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The School Improvement Partner is in the very early stages of evaluating the academy's work. He has identified a need for teachers to see excellent practice elsewhere and is helping the academy link with other schools. His initial evaluation of teaching based on visits to lessons has not done enough, however, to evaluate the impact of teaching on learning over time. There is over-reliance on an aggregate of snapshot observations, rather than judgements based on a wider range of evidence.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire, the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education and the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector