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Mr Simon Martin
Headteacher
Castle Academy
Station Road
Doncaster
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DN12 3DB

Dear Mr Martin

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Castle Academy, Doncaster

Following my visit to your academy on 04 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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 April 2014. 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:

- increase the effectiveness of strategies to raise pupils' achievements in all subjects in Years 1 to 6, especially in mathematics, and make certain that the quality and impact of teaching, especially for boys, pupils with special educational needs, and the most-able pupils, is at least good.

Evidence

During my visit, I met with you, other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and your school improvement partner. I spoke to pupils and teachers about their work. I studied progress, attendance and behaviour data, action plans and monitoring records of teaching. I visited every class, including Early Years Foundation Stage provision, and examined the work in pupils' books.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection one teacher has resigned, one teacher has gone on maternity leave, and a teaching assistant has been a long term absentee due to illness.

Main findings

The academy's leaders present as a confident, pragmatic and focused group, who are resolved to take whatever action is required to ensure that the overall effectiveness of the academy becomes good. They recognise it will be an uphill battle to turn around the evident decline in pupils' achievement, and the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress, as they move through the academy after the strong start they make in the Early Years Foundation Stage, but are confident they have the capacity to do so. Time will judge if they are correct. However, there are some initial positive signs that the strategic actions they are taking to tackle the key priorities are having some effect, although at present impact is modest. The challenge for the academy's leaders going forward is to halt the decline, accelerate the pace and effectiveness of improvement, and to stamp their authority and influence on driving the academy's improvement, as a matter of urgency.

Inspection evidence and the academy's latest progress data indicate that the strategies introduced to increase the effectiveness of teaching are having inconsistent impact with peaks and troughs apparent in pupils' learning and progress across classes, different groups of pupils, and subjects, and the proportions of pupils on track to meet their end of year targets. This variability needs eliminating so that all pupils make at least good progress. There is some evidence that staff are making better use of the information they collect from their checks on pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics to identify sooner, and intervene to support, underachieving pupils. They are also being more proactive in changing tack when improvement strategies are proving ineffective and building on those strategies which are showing evidence of working, rather than continuing down '*a dead end*'.

It is clear from observing lessons with the headteacher, examining pupils' books and talking to staff and pupils that staff are trying hard to use the various training and guidance they are receiving to increase their effectiveness of their work. For example, there was some evidence of teachers giving pupils time to respond to feedback received, by correcting and improving their work. Similarly, teachers planning and delivery demonstrated that they had sought to ensure pupils of all abilities were being given work that took account of what they already knew, could do, and where the remaining gaps were in their knowledge, skills and understanding in a particular subject. Teaching assistants and parent volunteers were also generally clear about their roles and responsibilities and had invariably discussed and agreed specific learning intentions for the children they were supporting with the class teacher. However, the volume, quality and pride displayed in pupils' books varied considerably. This was also true of the level of expectation from staff, the quality of feedback and the learning ethos promoted. The challenge going forwards is to ensure every child receives a core diet of high-quality teaching that inspires them to enjoy their learning and achieve well.

Current attendance and persistent absence levels in the academy compare favourably with national averages and the number of major incidents and recorded cases of inappropriate behaviour are relatively low. However, the academy may wish to reconsider its methods for recording incidents occurring at social times so that it better able to identify more precisely any patterns, trends, triggers or regular perpetrators more readily.

Academy leaders' impact on driving up standards and raising pupils' achievement at Key Stages 1 and 2 needs to increase. Steps have been taken to hold teachers more to account for the progress of pupils in their classes through robust meetings about pupil progress, more rigorous performance management and more regular scrutiny of their practice. Leaders have also facilitated training and development in conjunction with their partners.

However, performance management of teaching assistants is not yet in place. Pupils with special educational needs have had their IEP's reviewed and adjusted to incorporate more discrete academic achievement targets. Middle leaders are being empowered to take more of a leading role in driving improvement across the academy and they are responding positively to this increased autonomy. Nevertheless, the academy is not yet on the cusp of becoming good and there remains much work to be done before it is.

Governors present as committed and ambitious for the academy's future. They accept that things are far from perfect and have a realistic view of the academy's main strengths and shortcomings. They have the skills to provide suitable support to the academy's leaders and understand that they must also temper this with challenge and do so without fear or favour, based on honest evaluation of the impact of their strategic actions.

The academy's improvement plans are generally suitable. However, they should ensure they know exactly how they are going to measure progress against each target, for example, by clarifying and agreeing what is meant by pupils 'always completing a good amount of work', or being more specific about the extent of progress to be made by pupils at set milestones.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection. In the meantime, the academy should email a termly progress report to me.

External support

The academy is receiving a range of support, advice and guidance to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching. Principally, this is coming from a former local authority advisor and headteacher, who is now an educational consultant, acting as the academy's improvement partner, and Darfield Upperwood Primary School in Barnsley, which was rated as good overall by Ofsted and outstanding for leadership. There are some initial signs that these arrangements are proving effective but it is early days. Both of these Partners are providing the academy with a degree of independent external scrutiny.

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

Yours sincerely

John Young
Her Majesty's Inspector