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Peter Brown
Principal
Top Valley Academy
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Top Valley
Nottingham
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Dear Mr Brown

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Top Valley Academy

Following my visit to your school on 16 July 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 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 school should take further action to:

- amend the academy development plan, so that it lists actions, milestones and staff involved more clearly
- use information gathered about teachers' performance to create a bespoke programme of professional development training
- implement the academy's new performance management system as soon as possible

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the academy's sponsor to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The academy improvement plan was evaluated. The Head of Academy and the deputy principal took me on a tour of the school and we visited several classrooms to see the learning that was taking place.

Context

Four teachers will leave the academy at the end of the summer term. Eight new teachers will begin work at the academy in September. This includes one extra teacher in English, mathematics and science.

Main findings

You and your colleagues have responded well to the findings of the academy's recent inspection. There is a positive team spirit among the academy's leaders. The Head of Academy and the deputy principal with responsibility for teaching and learning, in particular, are helping you to drive improvements.

You have revised the roles and responsibilities of staff within the school to help you address the academy's areas for development. As a result, there are now two new leaders with responsibility for improving aspects of student behaviour, a new senior leader responsible for the achievement of the academy's most-able students, and a leader overseeing the implementation of your new Key Stage 3 curriculum.

You have changed the curriculum significantly for the next academic year for those students in Years 7, 8 and 9. This is to address the need to improve the literacy and numeracy of your students, especially those who struggle with these skills. From September, all of these students will experience lessons in the 'Acceler8' curriculum, which is being timetabled as a separate subject.

In order to achieve the best impact in this regard, students have taken tests and senior leaders have reviewed the results. This has provided a valid baseline which has been effective in helping senior leaders place students in suitable groups. This includes all the Year 6 pupils who will join the academy next term.

Middle leaders are becoming more involved in improving the academy. Several are now attending 'Academic Review Boards' at which students' progress is considered and actions for appropriate interventions are planned. Middle leaders are also increasingly involved in the performance management of teachers in their areas of responsibility.

You are raising the aspirations of students. This was best seen during this visit through 30 Year 6 pupils taking part in the 'Flying Start' programme – a week of engaging activities which aim to help these pupils settle in to the academy and therefore make progress more quickly from when they begin as Year 7 pupils in September. You have also revised your expectations of what students can achieve. This includes the expectation that Year 7 students will aim to make one full level of progress in all subjects in their first year at the academy.

A good level of challenge in lessons was apparent during this visit. Two teachers have very recently completed a six-week coaching programme in which raising the level of challenge in lessons was a focus. You have plans to begin a new system of teacher performance management in which coaching has a prominent role. This is currently scheduled to begin in November, but should start sooner. Furthermore, senior leaders should use the data they have on teachers' performance to create a programme of training which is best suited to individual teachers' needs. This will help teachers address some of the areas of development identified by the recent inspection such as improving skills in effective questioning, or being more aware of students' prior knowledge.

Those teachers with responsibility for subject areas have been asked to create subject-specific marking policies, all of which must include opportunities for students to respond to teachers' feedback. The subject leader for history will pilot his approach in September, to be reviewed by you by half-term. It is important that students experience this across all subject areas by the end of the autumn term.

The assistant head responsible for the 'climate for learning' has written a new set of expectations in this regard. This teacher and other senior leaders have worked successfully with the student council to agree actions towards improving students' attitudes around the school and in their lessons. These have been well-received by students in assemblies.

Governors have recruited a National Leader of Education who will train them on how to better understand the use of pupil premium funding, and on how to challenge senior leaders effectively about the impact of this. They will also receive training on how to interpret pupil progress data more effectively. Governors have revised their calendar of meetings to link with when the academy reports on the progress students are making. This will put governors in a position where they can hold leaders to account for student achievement on a more timely basis.

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

The sponsor, Central Academy Trust, holds the academy's senior leaders to account through monitoring student progress data, through termly meetings and through the requirement of the Principal to produce evaluative reports on the academy's performance. The sponsor provides the academy with effective support in key administration areas such as information and communication technology, health and safety, finances and human resources. The Trust provided necessary support regarding the academy's proposals to build new facilities. The sponsor is helping to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the academy and the other school it sponsors, South Nottinghamshire Academy.

The academy is a member of the Transform Teaching School Alliance and has benefited from working with other schools in the Challenge Partners initiative, in which schools work together to improve. The academy also works closely with Carlton le Willows Academy and Quarrydale Academy, with a particular focus on moderating assessments in English and mathematics. This will be extended to other subject areas from September.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian McNeilly
Her Majesty's Inspector