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Mr C Gray
Principal
Grindon Hall Christian School
Nookside
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR4 8PG

Dear Mr Gray

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grindon Hall Christian School, Sunderland

Following my visit to your school on 19 September 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 March 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:

- set a higher level of ambition for the proportion of students exceeding expected rates of progress by ensuring target setting process are always aspirational
- cross-reference the different checks made on the quality of teaching to gain a rounded and more accurate view of the quality of teaching over time
- adjust the timings of assessment, moderation and monitoring and evaluation activities so that there is enough information available at governing body meetings to enable timely and robust challenge.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior leaders, five members of the governing body and an external consultant commissioned to support the school, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I reviewed the school

improvement plan, documents relating to the checks made on the quality of teaching and recent pupil progress data.

Context

Four teachers have joined the school since the March inspection, replacing those who left at the end of the summer term. A number of other teachers have changed their part-time working pattern. Two new governors have also been appointed.

Main findings

The entire school community was shocked by the outcome of the March inspection. The adjustment to the change of school designation and the different expectations that this brings have all impacted on the current situation, but you have not used this as an excuse. A review of long-established ways of working has been undertaken quickly and, as a result, you are beginning to strengthen some of the fundamental systems and processes relating to teaching and leadership. Most significantly, you now acknowledge that the effectiveness of the school is not solely about the finished product by the age of sixteen but about how well prepared all students are for their next stage of education. This has been a powerful adjustment in the mindset of leaders, governors and staff in recognising what students should be achieving at key points in their education.

Systems to improve the assessment, moderation and tracking of student achievement, started before the inspection, are becoming well established. Students are increasingly aware of their own learning and are rising to the challenge of improving upon their own performance. However, target setting systems do not routinely provide aspirational targets to enable a higher proportion of students to exceed expected rates of progress. There is therefore a risk that some may not achieve as highly as they are capable over time. Processes to monitor the quality of teaching are also embedding into practice. Leaders regularly undertake classroom observation, scrutiny of work and an analysis of students' progress data but, they do not make best use of their time by cross-referencing these sources of information to give a fully rounded view of the quality of teaching over time. This risks giving too rosy a view of how far teaching still has to go to reach the very highest levels of classroom performance.

Governors bring a broad range of professional expertise to their roles. All acknowledge a fundamental shift in their relationship with leaders over recent months and are resolute that they can no longer be an 'arm's length' body. Governors are committed to the school, fully invested in the improvement journey and are keen to achieve excellence quickly. Increased visits to school, including first-hand appreciation of the work being undertaken in classrooms, are allowing governors to ask more pertinent questions about teaching and offer more robust challenge to leaders about its impact on student achievement. Aligning the timings of assessment, moderation and monitoring with the dates for governing body

meetings will ensure that all meetings can be used as opportunities to challenge leaders about the difference their work is making to students.

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

As an established Principal, you welcome the scrutiny that external partners can bring to the work of the school. You have found the advice of leaders from other free schools who have been through a similar transition to your own particularly valuable when reviewing long established systems and this has helped you to find a useful way forward. The very recent commissioning of an external consultant and the partnership working with Emmanuel College Teaching Alliance should be capitalised upon quickly to develop the quality of teaching and leadership further.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Sunderland and as below.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form
- DfE - Academies Advisers Unit [open.FREESCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk] - for academies, free schools, UTCs and studio schools