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Mrs C Beech
Principal
High Weald Academy
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Cranbrook
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Dear Mrs Beech

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to High Weald Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 21 October 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 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 July 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the sponsor are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- make sure that the analyses of students' achievements give clear and useful information to teachers
- support middle leaders to be able to drive improvements in their areas effectively, and to hold their staff to account for students' progress
- add interim measures of success into the improvement plan, and make sure all targets are challenging.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and other senior staff, the chief executive officer and another representative of Brook Learning Trust who are the

sponsors, the Chair of the Trust's board of directors, representatives of the governing body, and the principal adviser from the local authority, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plan and its self-evaluation. We briefly visited a number of classrooms to see teaching and learning.

Context

Since the previous inspection you have taken up post as Principal of the academy. There has been a large number of new staff joining the academy this year, following a re-structuring in the summer. The senior team has been reduced in size, and there has been a temporary one-year appointment of a member of staff from another academy within the trust.

Main findings

You command the trust and support of the sponsors and the local authority to bring about the improvements required in the academy.

Progress since the last inspection has been rapid. You have made a strong start on making this a good school by capitalising on your close involvement in the leadership of the academy last year. There have been significant improvements already to many of the systems underpinning the day-to-day work of the academy. For example, there has been a useful reorganisation of how the performance of teachers is managed. Greater clarity in the guidelines around the management of students' behaviour is helping staff to raise their expectations of students, and to reward them for good work and positive attitudes. Analyses of the achievements of groups of students are now more thorough, and they focus usefully on influencing the progress different groups of students make. However, they need to be more straightforward for teachers to use, to help them to improve teaching and learning.

Subjects are now grouped into faculties so that teaching and leadership expertise can be shared and developed better. Faculty heads are producing better, more detailed self-evaluation and development plans this term. The coaching of middle leaders is helping them to understand how they will drive improvements in their own areas. This process should also be used to show them how they can make their staff more accountable for better outcomes. There are also useful plans for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the work of teams, for example the faculty reviews to be undertaken this year.

You are currently working with the local authority and the sponsors in redefining the academy's role and vision for its future. This will involve maintaining the strong emphasis on care and sense of community in the academy, and offering more challenge for students to achieve better. You are committed to the academy being a

small rural school serving a rural community, and providing an outstanding quality of education for its students. The local authority is clear that it wants the academy to remain viable in the face of falling student numbers locally, and it is working with you to make sure that this happens. The academy already has some good resources to draw on, including its impressive working farm and links with local colleges of further education.

Your evaluation of the academy's strengths and development needs is thorough, accurate and very useful. The priorities identified are clearly represented in the academy improvement plan. Closing gaps in achievement, for example between boys and girls, and between the performance of disadvantaged students and others, are prioritised clearly. Although you have plans to review progress in all key areas regularly, there are too few indications of what the precise impact of important actions will be at key points in the year. Some of the targets need to be more ambitious, for example the proportion of students making the progress expected of them, and even better progress, in English and in mathematics.

The improvement plan also gives teaching quality appropriate prominence. You are developing good strategies to mentor individual and small groups of staff to enable more to become good and outstanding teachers. This includes groups of teachers working on similar skills, and the use of a good range of techniques to use lesson observations to recognise strengths and identify development needs. It is very useful that the academy has a specialist leader of education (SLE) on the staff, with specific skills in developing teaching and learning.

The sixth form is small but provides a range of useful educational opportunities for students. You, the sponsors and the local authority have good ideas around how it can adapt to meet the specific further education needs of young people locally. This will involve continuing strong academic provision, some in liaison with a local grammar school, and specialist but broad-based programmes in agriculture and sports studies.

There are already indications of improvement in students' achievements in some aspects of the 2014 GCSE results. The proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs graded A*-C, including in English and mathematics, rose dramatically in 2014 to become near the national average. This will not necessarily be reflected in national performance tables because these better grades were not always achieved at students' first examination entries, but this reflects much better overall achievement. The proportion of students making the progress expected of them in mathematics rose substantially. More disadvantaged students achieved five good GCSEs including English and mathematics than the year before, although the gap in achievement between them and their peers stayed the same because both groups achieved better outcomes. Boys' achievement improved significantly, but again the gap between their achievement and that of girls remained constant. Achievement in

the sixth form remained steady in 2014; the slightly lower proportion of good grades reflected the attainment on entry to the sixth form of this cohort.

Governors are holding you and senior staff to account positively and assertively. They are keen to see improvement come about and are working closely with the Trust to ensure that the development plan targets are met. They are giving a lot of thought to their own ways of working to enable them to continue to provide high levels of support and challenge to you and the academy.

External support

The sponsors, The Brook Learning Trust, work very closely with you to provide good strategic support for your vision. As well as providing good quality human resources, finances and estate management support, they are also working closely with the local authority to plan how the academy will provide for the needs of local children strongly in the future. The sponsors also provide very useful networking and joint training opportunities with the two other academies in the Trust, and draw on the expertise of the Brook Alliance through the Medway Teaching School Alliance. This includes subject-specific support from SLEs. The Trust is also working with you to improve the quality of middle leadership in the academy. There are good plans to strengthen the coherence and coordination of post-16 provision across all three academies in the Trust. The Trust works closely with the governors and with you to hold the academy to account for the quality of its work and the successful delivery of the actions detailed in the improvement plan.

The local authority is very supportive of the academy. It maintains impressively close links with the academy and the sponsors, and is keen to complement your work with your sponsors by offering further support. An adviser from the local authority has already visited this term, to provide commentary on your post-inspection action plan and to identify areas in which they can provide support for further improvement; they show interest in supporting some exciting curriculum developments in the sixth form over the next few years.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector