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23 April 2015

Mrs Sarah Thompson
Principal
South Axholme Academy
Burnham Road
Epworth
Doncaster
South Yorkshire
DN9 1BY

Dear Mrs Thompson

No formal designation monitoring inspection of South Axholme Academy

Following my visit with Tanya Stuart, Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 22 April 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged students. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management (including governance) at the academy.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the Executive Principal, the Principal, senior leaders, the heads of English and mathematics, groups of students, members of the governing body, and representatives of the academy trust. Inspectors also scrutinised documents relating to the achievement of disadvantaged students, attendance records and the academy's self-evaluation and improvement plan.

Context

South Axholme became an academy in December 2011. It is an averaged sized secondary school. Students follow a range of academic and vocational courses on the academy's site. The Principal at the time of the previous inspection in January 2013 is now the Executive Principal. The current Principal took up her appointment in April 2014.

The proportion of disadvantaged students supported by pupil premium funding (additional government money) is lower than the national average. The number of looked after children studying at the academy is very small.

Leadership and management

At the time of the previous inspection in January 2013, the vast majority of disadvantaged students were reported to be making good progress and achieving highly by the end of Year 11. This included students known to be eligible for free school meals, as well as the small minority of looked after children. The attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers nationally had reduced over the preceding three years. However, outcomes at the end of Year 11 in 2014 showed that this was no longer the case. The proportion of students supported by the pupil premium funding achieving five A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, at GCSE was below the national average and well below the achievement of non-disadvantaged in the academy and nationally. Insufficient numbers of disadvantaged students made expected and more than expected progress, particularly in English and mathematics, as they moved through the school. Furthermore, the progress made by some disadvantaged students was inhibited by poor attendance.

The senior leadership team identified the performance of disadvantaged students as a priority for improvement and took immediate steps to rectify the situation. The structure of the senior leadership team was reviewed resulting in greater accountability for the provision and achievement of this group of students. The effectiveness of the English and mathematics departments has been reviewed to good effect, systems to monitor the progress of disadvantaged students accurately have been strengthened and a close working relationship with the local primary academy is positively influencing professional practice and transitional arrangements. Furthermore, greater parental engagement has ensued in order to support learning and counteract the unacceptable absence of some students. However, the senior leadership team recognises that the amount of absence of some students is a concern.

The most significant action taken by senior leaders in relation to the achievement of disadvantaged students is the introduction of greater accountability for individual subject teachers in relation to students' progress. Consideration is also being given to holding teaching assistants to account for the significant contribution they make to the progress of disadvantaged students. This is underpinned by regular students' progress meetings between teachers and senior staff in order to identify underachievement at an early stage. Pupil premium funding is now being used to support coaching, training and support in relation to teaching and learning for teachers and teaching assistants. This represents a major shift in direction with regard to the use of the pupil premium allocation. Senior leaders have evaluated the impact that established strategies are having on students' progress, including the intervention of pastoral staff, life coaching, peer mentoring, booster lessons and support provided by teaching assistants. Senior leaders came to the conclusion that, while they all make a positive contribution to students' self-esteem, confidence and

emotional stability, a greater focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning within lessons was required if students are to realise their potential.

The result of the action taken by the senior leadership team is clear. An analysis of academy held data indicates that students known to be eligible for free school meals are now making better progress than at any time in the past 12 months, especially in English and mathematics. Furthermore, a greater proportion is now making at least expected progress with an increasing number making more than expected progress. The very small number of looked after children are also demonstrating improved progress due in the main to bespoke packages of support that tap into their interests and personal ambitions. Leaders are confident that this improvement will be reflected in the end of Year 11 outcomes and the data support this assertion.

Senior leaders know that if the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers is to be eradicated more work needs to be done. At present departmental leaders are not planning for improvement effectively. While they know what improved achievement for disadvantaged students looks like, they are less clear how to accomplish it. There is no link between strategies designed to enhance progress and what it is students are expected to achieve. As a consequence, a teacher's ability to plan lessons linked to clear performance targets for students is constrained. The academy has been working hard to ensure that activities and experiences in lessons are well matched to students' learning needs. This will be achieved when all teachers refine their skills of assessment so that they are able to identify gaps in students' skills, knowledge and understanding during lessons and use this information to plan appropriate work. Finally, the focus on improving the attendance of disadvantaged students must be intensified as it is undermining the school's attempts to raise the achievement of this group of students.

The governing body receives regular information about the performance of all students in the academy but particularly those supported by the pupil premium funding. Governors are knowledgeable about what the funding is spent on and the impact it is having on achievement. Governors recognised the recent decline in the performance of disadvantaged students as a concern and are working closely with senior leaders to address the issue. While holding leaders to account they are also very much part of the managerial team charged with raising achievement and take this responsibility seriously. Governors are taking steps to link the information presented to them by academy leaders about students' progress by seeing for themselves the evidence in students' work that supports this judgement.

The academy trust is giving good support to the governing body, senior leaders and staff in relation to improving outcomes for disadvantaged students. The trust facilitated the partnership working with the associated primary academy that resulted in the introduction of regular student progress meetings. The trust also played a significant role in the review of the senior leadership team to ensure greater accountability for the performance of students benefiting from pupil premium funding. The trust championed the introduction of bespoke packages of support to enhance the progress of looked after children. All of these actions have

had a positive effect on the academy's ability to support the provision and progress of disadvantaged students effectively.

The sense of urgency demonstrated by all levels of leadership in the way they responded to this issue of underachievement coupled with the emerging signs that the gap is beginning to close suggests that the academy has the capacity to secure further improvements quickly.

The strengths in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- the pro-active and reflective approach of the current senior leadership team and the determination to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students in comparison to all students nationally
- the work of a member of the senior leadership team in monitoring the quality of provision and tracking students' progress as they move through the academy
- placing greater responsibility on individual departments and teachers for the progress of students supported by the pupil premium funding
- the introduction of regular reviews of students' progress involving heads of department, subject teachers and senior leaders that holds those responsible for students' progress to account
- the use of pupil premium funding to support continuing professional development in relation to the use of assessment so that all teachers hone their ability to identify students' misconceptions and take immediate action to address them
- developing bespoke packages of support for looked after children that take into account their interests and personal goals
- a governing body that challenges and supports the academy in equal measure, particularly in relation to the achievement of disadvantaged students
- the extent to which the academy trust has effectively supported the work of senior leaders, particularly over the past eight months, to raise the achievement of disadvantaged students.

The weaknesses in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- the academy has yet to reduce significantly the amount of absence and persistent absence of some disadvantaged students and this is limiting their achievement
- greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing students' attitudes to learning, particularly in their first two years in the academy
- not all teachers are adept at identifying students' misconceptions during lessons or over time and this is inhibiting progress

- the action plans produced by heads of department to raise the achievement of disadvantaged students do not always identify how heads of department intend to bring this about and often fail to make clear reference to the skills, knowledge and understanding students are expected to acquire
- teaching assistants are not currently monitored rigorously enough and are not held sufficiently to account for the work they do.

Priorities for further improvement

- Take further steps to reduce the level of absence of disadvantaged students.
- Develop teachers' skills in the use of assessment so that they are able to identify gaps in students' skills, knowledge and understanding and take swift action to address them.
- Ensure that heads of departments' action plans make a clear link between the actions designed to secure improvement and the skills and knowledge that students are expected to acquire that will reflect improved achievement.
- Monitor the work of teaching assistants more closely and incorporate them into the performance management process.
- Ensure that the proposed summer school has a clear purpose relating to the development of students' positive attitudes to learning that would prove beneficial as they move through the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Director for People for North Lincolnshire, to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Keeler
Her Majesty's Inspector