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Stephen Munday
Executive Principal
Comberton Village College
West Street
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Dear Mr Munday

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Comberton Village College

Following my visit to your academy on 30 April 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm 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 achievement of disadvantaged students.

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 focused on the achievement of disadvantaged students and the impact and effectiveness of leaders, including governors, in improving outcomes for this group.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you and your senior leadership team, and also met with four subject leaders, two governor representatives (including a Trustee of the Academy Trust), and groups of students from Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. I also had telephone conversations with two parents. I scrutinised documentation relating to the achievement, attendance and destinations of disadvantaged pupils; I looked at governors' minutes; and the academy's policy, planning and review documents. I conducted a learning walk to observe the students in a range of different lessons, to discuss their learning and to look at their work.

Context

The academy was last inspected in February 2013, when its overall effectiveness was judged outstanding. Since the inspection there have been several changes in the leadership team, including the appointment of an Assistant Principal with overall responsibility for inclusion, who took up post in September 2014. Although the academy's student profile remains largely unaltered, the opening of Cambourne Village College in September 2013, as part of The Comberton Academy Trust, has changed the academy's own catchment area. Most students from Cambourne now attend the new school, and Year 7 students at Comberton come from a wider area and from a larger number of feeder primary schools.

The impact of leadership and management in raising achievement of disadvantaged students

The last inspection reported that 'Pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and receiving extra support through the pupil premium are performing outstandingly well and better than similar pupils nationally. The gap between these pupils' attainment and that of others in the college is rapidly closing as a result of careful use of the pupil premium funds'. Since the inspection, published results indicate that gaps in achievement narrowed substantially in 2013, as predicted, but that this improvement was not sustained in 2014. However, the published headline figures for 2014 are misleading because most disadvantaged students in Year 11 achieved just as well as their classmates. The academy's rigorous analysis indicates that the overall figures were skewed by particular factors, some of which pertained to the circumstances of a small number of individual students. In this regard, the academy stands firmly behind its inclusion policy which supports students, some of whom might otherwise be susceptible to permanent exclusion. The academy ensures that its most vulnerable students get the provision and guidance necessary to make a sustainable transition to employment, training or further education at the age of 16. Senior leaders monitor closely the destinations of school-leavers and can point to successful outcomes both for those disadvantaged students who decide to stay in the academy sixth form and those who choose different pathways. However, liaison with primary schools is less well developed, and best practice is not shared between different schools.

Senior and middle leaders, including subject leaders and Heads of Year, make good use of detailed assessment information to review the progress of disadvantaged students so that any individuals who are in danger of falling behind are quickly identified. A wide range of targeted interventions is in place to support any students who are struggling, but the academy is also strategic in putting in place support for vulnerable students who may be in danger of falling behind. Sixth form students, for example, are trained to support the learning and personal development of students in Key Stages 3 and 4, and are excellent role models for younger students. Evidence from assessment data indicates that attainment gaps in English and mathematics

that are evident when students start Year 7 are narrowed as students move through Key Stage 3. The proportion of disadvantaged students making expected progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 is in line with, or above, the figures for non-disadvantaged pupils nationally and well above the figure for similar pupils. Looked after children make particularly good progress during their time at Comberton. Sixth form students who are in receipt of bursary grants achieve exceptionally well.

The academy recognises that the absence rates and fixed term exclusion figures for disadvantaged students were too high in 2013/14. Sharply focused work this year has improved this picture, but it remains the case that disadvantaged students are more likely than their classmates to be persistent absentees or excluded from school. Senior and middle leaders do not readily triangulate information about students' absence and behaviour when analysing students' progress and achievement. Although the academy has plenty of information about its vulnerable students, its monitoring relies too narrowly on assessment information, without relating this to other key indicators, which are inextricably linked to the students' achievement and personal development. The Pupil Premium Policy, for example, only sets out a narrow range of outcomes, and the academy's published review of Pupil Premium expenditure is not specific enough about its measurable impact. Outcomes for attendance, behaviour, exclusions, parental engagement and destinations do not feature strongly enough in evaluations of the impact of the academy's work.

Disadvantaged students achieve well because the quality of teaching is excellent. This is because the academy's leadership is wholly committed to achieving excellence for all, and to ensuring that disadvantage is no barrier to this ambition. This determination is reflected in the relentless drive to improve teaching and sustain high attainment and outstanding achievement. Careful consideration is given to timetabling, with strategic allocation of the best teachers to specific groups. The students recognise that the academy has very high expectations of them, but say that they do not feel under undue pressure because they are well taught and effectively supported. They know their target grades and understand what they need to do to achieve these. The academy's effective engagement with parents and families is reflected in the high levels of attendance at parent meetings, and the positive feedback from parents about the academy's work to support their children's academic achievement.

The governing body shares the high expectations and the resolve of senior leaders that all students will excel, regardless of their starting points or circumstances. Governors are well informed about the progress and achievement of disadvantaged students, and use assessment data to monitor the academy's work and ask challenging questions. Governing body minutes show that governors are vigilant in identifying issues, and insist that the evaluations are underpinned by clear evidence.

External support

Senior leaders work effectively with academies in the Trust and with other partner secondary schools to evaluate provision and share best practice. Senior leaders are strategic in using external funding to develop projects to critically review and strengthen the academy's provision.

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

- Leaders, including governors, share an unrelenting determination to provide the highest quality teaching and secure the best outcomes for all students. The academy monitors very closely the quality of teaching and provision for disadvantaged students.
- The achievement of disadvantaged students is central to the academy's self-evaluation and strategic planning. The academy has established strong lines of accountability, linked specifically to the achievement of disadvantaged students. Achievement outcomes for disadvantaged students are threaded through teachers' performance management systems and subject performance reviews, and are embedded in forward planning.
- Leaders, including governors, monitor rigorously the achievement of students. Assessment information is used systematically to monitor students' progress, and to intervene swiftly to support any individuals who are in danger of falling behind. Students say they are well supported.
- The academy tailors its provision to meet the individual needs and aspirations of its students by providing suitable courses and qualifications, including 'early entry' where appropriate, regardless of the impact of this on the academy's published performance figures. Guidance, including independent guidance and careers advice, is a notable strength.

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

- Reviews of the academy's work are not sharp enough because expected outcomes and planned improvements are too narrowly focused on student achievement.
- Students' transition from primary school at the age of 11 are less closely monitored than when they leave compulsory education at the age of 16, because the work of feeder primary schools with disadvantaged pupils is not well understood.

Priorities for further improvement

- Reduce the comparatively high figures for absence and fixed-term exclusions of disadvantaged students.
- Ensure that academy policies, development planning and monitoring are more rigorously underpinned by specific outcomes linking students' academic progress to attendance, behaviour and exclusions, parental engagement and student destinations.
- Liaise more closely with feeder primary schools so that best practice from each phase is shared and developed.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Cambridgeshire, 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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector