

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment
Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 123 1231

Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566933

Direct F 01695 729320

Direct email: ggleaden@cftb.com



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Mrs Alison Sherman
Headteacher
The Sutton Academy
Elton Head Road
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 5AU

Dear Mrs Sherman

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Sutton Academy, St. Helens

Following my visit to your academy on 1 May 2015, 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 January 2015. 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 academy should take further action to:

- ensure that more able learners are consistently challenged in their work
- explore further opportunities for teachers to share best practice across the academy
- build on the work started to develop students' understanding of other cultures
- continue to explore and embed approaches to developing students' oracy skills.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders, a group of six teachers, a group of nine students from Years 9 and 10 and the Chair and vice-chair

of the Governing Body. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. The focus of the meetings was to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. In addition, you accompanied me on a tour of the academy and we made short visits to a number of lessons. I evaluated the academy's action plan. I looked at a range of documentation including the minutes of the Governing Body meetings since the inspection and senior leaders' evaluation of students' current achievement.

Context

An assistant principal left the academy at February half term and a new senior vice-principal took up post after the February half-term break. A new learning director for science, a curriculum leader for Key Stage 3 mathematics and a curriculum leader for business studies took up their posts at the academy after Easter. The senior leadership team has been restructured and a colleague in mathematics has been promoted to lead practitioner in this subject area.

Main findings

Senior leaders and members of the governing body share a strong sense of urgency and a recognition of the need for improvement in the academy. The recent restructure of the leadership team is ensuring that there is a sharp focus and clear lead on the areas for improvement. Leaders expressed the view that there is 'increased vigour, a new outlook, a tighter focus and increased accountability' for developments in the academy. The post-ofsted action plan is detailed and contains concrete actions linked to each of the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report.

A range of approaches are developing the quality of teaching since the inspection and leaders report that these are beginning to impact positively. Training sessions have taken place on a number of aspects including questioning techniques and tailoring work to meet the needs of students. Teachers spoken to said that this training had improved the way they ask questions in lessons because they challenge students to answer in depth. Consequently students are encouraged to think more deeply about the concepts presented.

Processes for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning have been tightened. These processes now include looking at the results from work sampling, students' progress data, learning walks and observations to form a more robust view of the quality of teaching. Teachers spoken to said that they value the feedback from the learning walks and the work scrutiny although they do not always receive written or individual feedback when their marking has been looked at.

A weekly literacy focus has been introduced giving all departments a key aspect to focus on each week. Teachers and students say that this consistency is helping to reinforce students' understanding of the literacy areas covered. Students also value

the 'work improvement time' ('WIT') that they are given to help them to reflect on their work and there is evidence that they are beginning to act on the feedback given by their teachers.

In mathematics, teachers have been working as coaching groups of three to develop their practice and across the academy an 'aspiring teaching programme' has taken place to develop high quality teaching standards. Senior leaders report that the training, coaching and development programmes are impacting positively on the quality of teaching and standards are improving.

The achievement of students is showing improvement. Predictions for GCSE examinations this year show improvements in the anticipated levels of progress in English and mathematics when compared with the 2014 results. The predictions for mathematics however, are still low when compared with national figures. Academy leaders are acutely aware of this and are focussed on strategies to bring about improvement. Assessments of performance are now more rigorous and have been externally moderated in English. This has not yet taken place in mathematics but is planned to do so.

Interventions for students to help accelerate their progress are now much tighter, with individualised, after-school and weekend classes targeted to particular needs and are effectively coordinated. The recent 'Easter school' was well attended and students in Year 11 who I spoke to on my tour of the academy said that they had appreciated the opportunity offered and had benefitted from this.

A range of strategies have been put in place to accelerate the progress of disadvantaged students. These include the internal appointments of two colleagues as 'pupil premium champions'. These colleagues work directly with students and parents to help to address learning needs. In addition, this aspect of the academy's work has now come under the direction of a senior vice-principal who is taking the strategic overview of developments. Data indicate that gaps in progress and attainment are narrowing and the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers is predicted to be significantly narrower in examinations this year at GCSE level.

The achievement of more able students is starting to show improvement but at a slower rate than in other areas and you and your senior leaders acknowledge that there is more to be done in this respect.

In order to promote the development of oracy skills, senior leaders have recently introduced 'salad days'. These days are designed to focus on the development of speaking and listening skills. These are at an early stage and student feedback indicates that they are not yet well embedded.

Work to develop students' understanding of different cultures and backgrounds has started to take place and a recent 'faith day' for students in Year 9 was positively

received. The organisation for the day was assisted by the chaplain from your sponsor and you are now looking for additional links and ways to develop this work further.

Members of the governing body have a strong understanding of the strengths and areas for development for the academy. They were fully involved in the formulation of the post-ofsted plan and are offering support and challenge to you and your senior leaders. Governors are involved in carefully monitoring the work of the academy and middle leaders are invited to present the overview of their data to the governors' meetings. This process is improving governors' understanding and increasing the accountability of middle leaders.

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

External support

The academy is working with two specialist leaders of education (SLEs), one in English and one in mathematics, from a neighbouring local authority. The SLEs are providing valued support for developments in teaching and learning in these subject areas and in English, an external view on the accuracy of the marking of coursework for students in Year 11. Contact has been made with a teaching school with a view to sourcing training for middle leaders. In addition, in liaison with the local authority, the academy is accessing a valuable range of training and networking opportunities with other local schools.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Julie Yarwood

Her Majesty's Inspector