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15 May 2015

Mr Vincent Murray
Headteacher
The Grange School
Wendover Way
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP21 7NH

Dear Mr Murray

No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Grange School

Following my visit to your school on 13 May 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 pupils. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management (including governance) at the school.

Evidence

During the visit, I held discussions with you, senior leaders and a representative from the local authority. I also met with middle leaders who are leading work to improve disadvantaged students' achievement and held a telephone discussion with the governor with responsibility for this area of work. I scrutinised documents relating to the achievement of disadvantaged students including the school's most recent self-evaluation, action plans and information about students' progress. I met with one group of disadvantaged students from Key Stage 4 and another from Key Stage 3. I looked at examples of mathematics and English work from each group. I also briefly visited four lessons to see evidence of how well teaching is meeting the needs of disadvantaged students.

Context

The Grange is a large secondary school. Students come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is higher than the national average, as is the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds, the largest proportions being of Pakistani and Black African ethnicity. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is average. The proportion of students eligible for support through the pupil premium (additional government funding for children who are looked after by the local authority and students known to be eligible for free school meals) is below average. The deputy headteacher who is leading the work on raising the achievement of disadvantaged students joined the school in September 2014. The school is involved with the local authority 'Narrowing The Gap' project.

Prior to June 2014 you, your senior leaders and governors were not doing enough to make sure disadvantaged students caught up on previous underachievement and made further good progress. The gap in achievement between these students and other students in school by the end of Key Stage 4 has remained wide for several years. Over the last year, you have placed a high priority on improving your approach to raising achievement for this group of students. You have sharpened the way you report and share information on disadvantaged students' progress over time. Each student now has an individual 'flight path' that clearly shows the progress they have made in each subject from their starting point since joining the school. Teachers have a 'flight path' for each student that they teach. Teachers and students are now better placed to identify when progress is not satisfactory and take action. Teachers are exploring ways of improving their practice, using ideas that have proven successful in other schools. They are starting to share what works with other teachers. Some approaches, such as actively involving disadvantaged students in question and answer sessions during lessons, are proving to be effective. However, much of this work is new and is not established practice across the school. Your more established work to improve the impact of teachers' marking and feedback is making a difference although this is not consistently the case. Several Key Stage 4 students showed me mathematics work acknowledged only with ticks. Teachers had not suggested any next steps in learning and not all the work set was suitably challenging. Improvements in support for students who need it to catch up, such as the nurture group introduced for Year 7, are helping.

Disadvantaged students are making noticeably better progress in English and mathematics in Years 10 and 7 and in English in Year 11 than was previously the case. Gaps in progress between disadvantaged students and their peers have closed significantly in these year groups and subjects. However, disadvantaged students' progress in English in Years 8 and 9 is on average still not fast enough and a considerable number of disadvantaged students in Year 11 have failed to catch up from previous underachievement in mathematics. Teaching and support is not yet consistently effective enough to ensure all students make good progress.

Disadvantaged students are, typically, absent much more often than their peers. Senior leaders and support staff have a range of approaches in place to work with students and parents and carers to improve students' attendance. This includes mentoring support and work with parents and carers. Leaders carefully document the help provided and the impact it has had on individual students' attendance. This support has been effective for some students, including those who are disadvantaged. Nevertheless, the proportion of disadvantaged students with poor attendance remains much higher than for other students in the school and disadvantaged students' overall attendance is on average still too low. On a more positive note, disadvantaged students in Key Stage 3 spoke of how well supported they are at school. Several spoke positively of student support services at Stapleton House, the school's support centre. Students also value the practical support provided, such as taxis to enable them to get to school or attend sports clubs or other off-site activities when other means of transport prove difficult. Years 10 and 11 students I spoke to had mixed views about their experience of school. Some felt they did not have the support they needed and were not confident there was an adult in school they could turn to in times of difficulty. They expressed reservations about the pastoral support provided by their form tutors.

The governing body recognises the importance of tackling disadvantaged students' previous underachievement and ensuring they make good progress. A 'Narrowing the Gap' governor now takes the lead for this area of work. He has a firm understanding of the issues that need tackling and is asking leaders suitably challenging questions. Rightly, he expresses concern that leaders' focus is only on stopping disadvantaged students falling further behind rather than making sure they also make further good progress. He recognises that previous evaluations of pupil premium spending have not been rigorous enough and is working to put this right.

External support

Your involvement in the local authority's 'Narrowing The Gap' project has been important in improving your approach to meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. A consultant has worked well with a team of middle and senior leaders to increase their understanding of the issues that need tackling and raise their awareness of nationally recognised good practice. The local authority has provided funding to support the project. Less positively, the local authority did not make sure that leaders understood the importance of identifying the starting point and the desired impact of each planned action on raising achievement. As a result, it is difficult to tell which actions are proving most effective. Leaders and teachers are not as well placed as they should be to decide which actions to build on, which to consider as lower priority and which to abandon.

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

- Raising disadvantaged students' achievement is a high priority across the school. Leaders, teachers and support staff are increasingly considering how best to meet the needs of disadvantaged students and are taking action.
- Teachers across the school are trying out approaches to teaching proven to be effective in raising disadvantaged students' achievement in other schools.
- Disadvantaged students welcome the newly introduced 'flight path'. It enables them to see clearly how well they are doing in each subject and understand how absence or disengagement from lessons slows their progress. This new approach leaves teachers and leaders better placed to focus sharply on raising achievement for this group of students.
- Your work to improve the quality of written and verbal feedback is helping many students understand better what they need to do to improve and make better progress.

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

- Leaders' previous evaluations of the impact of the use pupil premium funding have not been forensic enough. As a result, leaders and governors do not know the exact impact of each aspect of pupil premium spending. It is difficult to tell what worked and what did not.
- Leaders do not routinely analyse the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students in school and other students nationally. As a result, leaders and governors are at risk of thinking disadvantaged students' achievement is improving if an in-school gap is smaller than previously, when it is actually due to a drop in other students' performance.
- Plans to improve the school's approach to meeting the needs of disadvantaged students and raise achievement are not sharp enough. Leaders are not in a strong position to measure the exact success of actions taken this year because leaders did not identify starting points for each action taken in advance.
- Leaders do not set challenging enough targets for students' progress. School information about students' achievement only captures whether students are making satisfactory progress. Teachers and students are therefore not suitably focused on pushing for good or rapid progress. This is a barrier to raising disadvantaged students' achievement.

- Leaders have not analysed the patterns and attendance of different groups of disadvantaged students well enough to understand why actions have not secured the overall impact needed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Set aspirational targets for all students and ensure that disadvantaged students have targets to catch up and make further good progress.
- Always compare disadvantaged students' progress with that of other students nationally as well as other students in the school.
- Always identify the starting point and intended impact of actions planned to improve disadvantaged students' achievement. Ensure leaders are clear about what is and is not effective and respond accordingly.
- Analyse disadvantaged students' attendance in more depth, so leaders and teachers understand better the approaches that work and those that do not, and use the effective ones more widely.
- Make sure that all disadvantaged students in the school have someone they feel they can turn to in times of difficulty.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire, to the Secretary of State for Education and to the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Diana Choulerton
Her Majesty's Inspector