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Mrs Holly Hartley
Principal
Thistley Hough Academy
Thistley Hough
Penkhull
Stoke-On-Trent
ST4 5JJ

Dear Mrs Hartley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thistley Hough Academy, Stoke-On-Trent

Following my visit to your academy on 21 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 school should take further action to:

- Sharpen the academy improvement plan to increase the level of accountability through identifying key staff who will be responsible for:
 - checking the actions have been completed within a specified timescale
 - making sure the actions lead to the intended high quality outcomes

- Take steps to make sure that disabled students and those with special educational needs make better progress to quickly catch up with their peers by improving the impact of teaching assistants on improving learning for these students by:
 - finding out what high quality support looks like from visits to special schools and implementing ideas seen where appropriate

- through delivering training, make sure that teaching assistants have the necessary skills they need to carry out this role effectively

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the principal and other senior leaders, subject leaders of English and mathematics, the chair of the Governing Body and one other governor; and a telephone conversation was held with a representative of the Trust, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The update self-evaluation form and academy improvement plan were evaluated and a series of short visits to English lessons were carried out jointly with the subject leader of English.

Context

Since the inspection there has been a restructuring of the roles of senior leaders. A new assistant principal has been appointed for September 2015 who will have responsibility for further developing a culture of learning in the school. Other new posts to start in September 2015 include a new head of science, who will also have a senior role in the academy; and a new coordinator of special educational needs. Additional staffing for English and mathematics has already been provided through two intervention teachers.

Main findings

Together with your senior leaders you have passionately continued to drive improvements to teaching and learning in the academy and to take decisive action to ensure that the underachievement seen in the past, stops. Actions taken to improve teaching which had only recently been introduced at the time of the inspection have now had time to become embedded. Your records show there is now a much smaller proportion of teaching that is not yet 'good' or better.

Your introduction of your '10 non-negotiables' ensures all teachers have a clear understanding of your high expectations for teaching in the academy. Homework, one of these non-negotiables, is improving and work set helps students to build on their work in the classroom. Parents and carers are more aware of homework requirements and check this for themselves using an online resource.

Effective marking seen during the inspection in mathematics, has now been shared across all subjects. Students say they like this and know what they are doing well and how to improve the quality of their work. Marking is regularly checked and information on progress is used to inform your judgements on the quality of marking across the academy. Senior leaders are now confident that all inadequate marking has been eradicated.

Effective questioning is challenging students to think about their responses and to further develop their ideas. This was seen in English lessons during this visit and senior leaders know this practice is happening across the academy from short visits to lessons to look at the use of questions in lessons. Planning is improving following training on the use of data to plan activities that challenge all abilities. As a result, teachers are now better able to identify where there is underachievement and to take action to address this in the classroom.

The subject leader for English has driven a new approach to literacy and further work is planned to ensure the weakest readers catch up with their reading. Speaking skills are being targeted for further development through the introduction of the English Speaking Board. In mathematics, better support is provided for students who have fallen behind, which targets any students who are failing to make the progress they should, rather than concentrating on the attainment of Year 11 only. Schemes of work in mathematics have been revised and students have more opportunities to solve problems which is helping them to think more deeply about their mathematics.

Senior leaders and governors are better able to see the impact on achievement of these improvements to teaching through thorough monitoring. Information provided by academy leaders indicates that achievement is set to rise and the academy is indicated to be on track to be above the floor standard. Leaders at all levels rigorously check on the progress made by individuals, and groups, such as those who speak English as an additional language, the disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs. Underachievement is identified at the first sign of progress slowing and subject leaders identify gaps in learning and work to address these areas. Using this information, you have identified that many disabled students and those with special educational needs are making much slower progress than their same-ability peers. Support provided by teaching assistants in the classroom is not having enough impact on improving progress for these learners who need it the most. Forming links with special schools in the area may provide opportunities for training and sharing of effective practice.

Self evaluation processes are thorough and this information is used to revise the academy improvement plan which is reviewed and updated on a weekly basis. However, the plan does not allow you to hold staff to account where improvements are not happening quickly enough. The plan needs to state clearly who is responsible for checking actions have been completed and with the desired result.

Following the appointment of the new Chair of governors, shortly before the inspection, you have strengthened governance further through the appointment of a new governor with responsibility for checking the difference being made by pupil premium funding. Your recently completed review of pupil premium provides further guidance as to how this area of the work of the academy can be improved.

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

External support

Support and challenge from the Trust effective. Regular reviews are carried out by consultants which encourages the sharing of effective practice across schools and academies in the Trust. Further support is planned to support senior and subject leaders as their roles continue to become more strategic.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Stoke-on-Trent and as below.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector