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Ian Colling
Magdalen College School
Waynflete Avenue
Brackley
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Dear Mr Colling

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Magdalen College School

Following my visit with Jayne Ashman, Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 4 June 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 academy.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the headteacher and senior leaders, including the inclusion leader with oversight for the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. Further meetings were held with subject and pastoral leaders, and with two groups of students. The lead inspector visited an intervention session in mathematics, and spoke by telephone to the Vice Chair of the Governing Body, who has taken on responsibility for monitoring these students' achievement. A range of documentation relating to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils was scrutinised, including: current achievement data; attendance and exclusion records; case studies of individual students; the academy's self-evaluation and its development plans, and governors' minutes. Inspectors also reviewed the single central record, and looked at the work of students from different key stages.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the academy has undergone significant staffing changes. The leadership team has been restructured; a new deputy headteacher

was appointed, and took up post in September 2014, and an inclusion leader with oversight for the achievement of disadvantaged students was appointed in January 2015. In the mathematics department, a member of staff has taken responsibility for the achievement of these students in mathematics.

The academy is larger than the average-sized secondary school. The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium funding, though variable in different year groups, is well below the national average. In 2014, 18 students completed Year 11. Less than half of these students achieved five A*-C grades including English and mathematics, compared to almost three quarters of their peers. The gaps between their attainment and their peers' in English and mathematics grew in 2014, such that they were a grade and a half behind their peers in both subjects and over a grade behind others nationally. These students did not make the same rates of progress as their peers in English and mathematics, although they fared better than their peers in other subjects.

Leaders have now made the achievement of these students a high priority for the academy. A specific action plan has been drawn up that documents a range of strategies aimed at improving these students' attendance and achievement. However, staffing changes have slowed the rate of progress and have meant that work that was planned has not developed in sufficient depth.

The deputy headteacher and inclusion leader have begun the process of raising the profile of this group with all staff and ensuring that all teachers know how their needs can be addressed more effectively. They recognise that this has required a 'culture change', because previously, teachers were not always aware of who these students were, or had too low expectations of what they could achieve. This meant, for example, that they were not always guided to choosing the right courses at GCSE, and that too few of them stayed on in the sixth form or progressed to academic courses post-16. In some cases, students were placed in inappropriate teaching sets, and this limited the progress they were able to make.

Teachers now have much clearer information on these students, and a better understanding of how to ensure that they reach their full potential. A new data system allows teachers and leaders to track their progress more carefully, and to intervene when students are at risk of underachievement. Subject and pastoral leaders hold regular review meetings to discuss the achievement of these students. Leaders of learning monitor the achievement of students in their year groups, and liaise with pastoral support assistants and learning mentors to put in place appropriate pastoral support. Faculty leaders report on their achievement to senior leaders, who in turn meet regularly with governors to discuss the impact of actions taken.

These measures certainly have been successful in raising the profile of these students across the academy. However, not all leaders involved in the monitoring have sufficient authority to hold teachers to account for the progress of students.

The tracking system is less well-developed at Key Stage 3, and not all teachers have a clear understanding of how much progress these students should be making.

Where underachievement is identified, teachers and leaders put appropriate measures in place to help students catch up. This includes one-to-one tuition, small group support, and revision and catch-up sessions. All the students interviewed by inspectors had benefited from additional help, and were greatly appreciative of this. One spoke of the 'amazing support' she had received that had helped her to do better in school.

Disadvantaged students have received targeted advice and guidance, so that they now make better choices for their GCSE option subjects and their post-16 courses. Previously, vocational courses were seen as the natural next step for these students, but leaders are successfully challenging this assumption. More disadvantaged students are now taking academic courses at Key Stage 4, and they are very aware of the wide range of options open to them post-16. Leaders rightly see raising their aspirations as key to their success, and a number of students have benefited from trips to universities, including Oxford, and from high-quality, meaningful work experience programmes.

A new support team has focused on the attendance of disadvantaged students and has worked with students and their families to improve their attendance. As a result, the proportion of these students who are persistently absent from school has greatly reduced, and their overall attendance has improved. Better pastoral support is also ensuring that fewer disadvantaged students are excluded from school.

These actions are having some impact on the achievement of these students. Disadvantaged students in the sixth form are doing well, and are not lagging behind their peers. A greater proportion of students in the current Year 11 are predicted to achieve five A*-C grades including English and mathematics. However, in many cases, the targets set for these students are still too low. This is especially true of the more-able disadvantaged students. This means that many of them will still not make the progress they are capable of, and the gaps between their attainment and that of their peers will not close quickly enough.

The work in these students' books shows that some teachers still have too low expectations of what they can achieve. Too often, teachers accept work that shows little care and effort. These students are set tasks that are well below their ability level, and often produce too little work in lessons. Students told inspectors that in some subjects, their work is frequently not marked by teachers. This was confirmed by the inspectors' scrutiny of their work, which was often not marked at all, or marked but with very limited feedback. These students rightly feel let down, because they do not know how well they are doing. Teachers are giving them the wrong message that their work does not matter. Leaders recognise this, and have made attempts to address this, for example by suggesting that teachers mark these students' work first. This has not led to an improvement in the way the work is

marked, however, and does not address the fundamental issue that the standard of work is too low.

Leaders' routine monitoring of teaching does not always address the standard of students' work. Nor does it focus closely enough on how well these students are doing in class, and how teachers assess their progress in lessons. One student told inspectors that she sometimes 'feels invisible' to her teachers. While teachers are now set targets related to the performance of disadvantaged students, these students' day-to-day experiences mean that they are not sufficiently well challenged or assessed in class. Younger students told inspectors that many of their lessons are interrupted by low-level disruption.

The pupil premium action plan shows how leaders are beginning to evaluate the impact of actions taken to address underachievement, but this is not yet done with sufficient rigour, or shared with governors. Governors receive detailed information on how funds are used, and how well these students are doing in comparison to others. However, they do not have a clear view on which actions have been successful in raising achievement. The current structure of governance means that information on these students is shared separately with two different committees. This has led to some lack of clarity in how to hold leaders stringently to account for the achievement of these students.

The academy has very few students who are in the care of the local authority. Leaders work closely with authority officers to ensure that these students receive good care and an appropriate education.

External support

The academy has well-established relationships with local primary schools. Teachers at the academy run master classes in mathematics for Year 6 pupils, and share information on how work is assessed. Although they have not done so in the past, leaders are now collecting more detailed information about these pupils before they begin their secondary education, and are organising a summer school for disadvantaged pupils in order to improve transition arrangements. The academy is also part of a local cluster of secondary schools. Teacher and leader networks in this cluster are used effectively to share best practice, and one cluster group meets specifically to share best practice on raising achievement of disadvantaged students.

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

- Leaders have been successful in raising the profile of these students. Teachers and leaders at all levels understand the importance of addressing their needs more effectively.

- The new tracking system allows leaders and teachers to monitor their progress more closely, and to arrange for suitable individual help for students who are underachieving.
- The pastoral support given to these students in particular is effective and much valued by students.
- School leaders have reviewed the curriculum offer to ensure that disadvantaged students have greater opportunities to succeed.
- The quality of information, advice and guidance for these students is good. They now have a much greater understanding of the range of opportunities open to them.

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

- Expectations of these students are still not high enough. Targets set for them are too low, especially in English and mathematics.
- The tracking of students' achievement at Key Stage 3 is not as rigorous as at Key Stage 4. Consequently, underachievement is not always picked up quickly enough.
- Too often, teachers accept work that is not of good enough quality from disadvantaged students. Sometimes work is not challenging enough, especially for the more-able disadvantaged students. Marking is too infrequent, and feedback is not helping them to make better progress.
- Too many lessons lower down the school are interrupted by low-level disruption. This impedes the progress that these students make.
- Governors are not sufficiently involved in the monitoring and evaluation of pupil premium spending. The current committee structure means that not all governors have the information they need to hold leaders sufficiently to account.
- Leaders' routine monitoring of teaching does not focus sufficiently well on how well these students are doing in class, and on the quality of their work.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the impact of all actions taken is fully evaluated, and that governors are more fully involved in monitoring and evaluating this aspect of the academy's work.
- Review how targets are set to ensure that they are sufficiently challenging, especially for the more-able disadvantaged students.

- Improve how well leaders, including governors, quality assure this aspect of the academy's work by ensuring, for example, that lesson observations routinely focus on the quality of work these students produce, how well teachers assess their progress in class, and how well teachers' marking is helping them to make better progress.
- Ensure that all teachers deal effectively with low-level disruption in class, so that younger students in particular do not fall behind.
- Review roles and responsibilities of leaders, to ensure that all who are involved in monitoring this aspect of the academy's work have the authority and influence to change what is happening in the classroom.

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

Yours sincerely

Deirdre Duignan
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body