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30 June 2015

Jon Ford
Principal
Downham Market Academy
Bexwell Road
Downham Market
PE38 9LL

Dear Mr Ford

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Downham Market Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 29 June 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 March 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:

- Make the academy development plan sharper by identifying regular times during the year when progress towards targets can be measured so that those leading on initiatives can be held fully to account for the impact of their actions.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, groups of students, the Chair and three other members of the Governing Body and two representatives from the College of West Anglia Trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy development plan. I also reviewed the academy's records of recruitment checks on staff. We visited a number of lessons to observe students at work and to look at their books.

Main findings

The academy development plan suitably outlines all of the areas for improvement from the previous inspection as well as existing developments which you had already rightly identified. The plan does not always make clear how the impact of these actions will be measured and what the academy is expected to have achieved by a given deadline.

Your forecasts for the current Year 11 outcomes indicate an increase in the proportion of students set to gain five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including in English and mathematics. This forecast has been informed by frequent assessments of students' learning and progress, and has been externally validated by the achievement director of the trust. Students have made better progress in mathematics compared to the previous year. You have worked well with disadvantaged students to close the gaps in attainment between these students in the academy and other students nationally. Successful strategies have included a weekly Saturday school to allow students to catch up with their peers and the use of peer teaching where sixth form students studying mathematics, and those Year 11 students who sat their mathematics exams early, have worked with students who require additional support.

You have worked well to start to strengthen the quality of guidance teachers' provide to students by conducting reviews which focus on a different subject areas each week. These reviews have helped to target those teachers whose practice is not yet consistently strong. Students in Year 7 speak with confidence about how well they are doing following changes to the assessment system.

You are holding subject leaders more to account for the performance of their teams through fortnightly meetings with members of the senior leadership team and also through their presentations on standards to members of the governing body. A rolling programme of faculty reviews, which includes the link member of the governing body, has also served to strengthen the accountability of subject leaders. You are in the process of producing a new handbook for these leaders which clarifies their role and your expectations of them.

The governing body continues to be effective in holding senior leaders to account for their work. Governors who are linked to subject areas or who have responsibility for the achievement of different groups of students have improved their understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses by asking pertinent questions. They follow up key aspects which arise from their visits to the academy. The review of pupil premium expenditure took place in April 2015 and you have included the recommendations from this review in your academy development plan.

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

The College of West Anglia Trust provides an appropriate degree of support and challenge through the weekly visits. These visits monitor the progress made against the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection and suggest further points for action. The trust is also working well to strengthen leadership capacity by identifying effective practitioners and deploying these to work with leaders who will benefit from their support.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk, the Chief Executive Officer of the College of West Anglia Trust and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc. Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board

cc. Local authority

cc. The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form hns.efa@education.gsi.gov.uk

cc. CausingConcern.SCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk