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Mr P. Rowe
Headteacher
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Merton Road
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Dear Mr Rowe

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Princes Risborough

Following my visit to your academy on 6 July, 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. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

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 leaders are sufficiently rigorous and have high enough expectations when monitoring and evaluating the impact of planned changes.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, the deputy headteacher and the academy's middle leaders. I met with governors, including the acting Chair of Governors. I made phone calls to two consultants who have supported the academy. You accompanied me on short visits to classes. I scrutinised your action plan.

Context

Since the last inspection, a new acting Chair of Governors, and new chairs of governors' committees have been appointed. An assistant headteacher responsible for teaching and learning has also been appointed.

Main findings

You, your leaders and the academy's governors are determined to move the academy to good as quickly as possible. In your action plan, you have scheduled many appropriate actions for the summer term. These actions sensibly link closely to the areas for improvement in your recent inspection report. You have implemented most of these actions, which include new approaches to marking and developing the role of middle leaders. However, some of these planned new approaches are not having the impact you intended because a number of leaders have not checked them robustly enough. In addition, plans to improve behaviour need to be actioned more promptly. Consequently, in a small number of classes, students' behaviour is poor and teachers are too accepting of it.

You have rightly begun to strengthen the role of middle leaders in monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching. You now require middle leaders to check the quality of teaching on a more regular basis by observing lessons. You have also asked them to focus more on students' progress when carrying out evaluations of teaching. However, some middle leaders are not rigorous enough when they judge the quality of teaching. Their expectations of how well students can achieve and how much teachers should stretch students are too low. Consequently, in some science and mathematics lessons, students are not being sufficiently challenged and as a result a small number of students become disengaged and disrupt the learning of others. You have also asked middle leaders to scrutinise students' books to gauge whether the new approach to marking, known as STAR, is being used effectively. As part of this new system, teachers are required to include follow-up questions and additional tasks in their comments at the end of students' work. However, while some middle leaders have thoroughly checked that the teachers they manage have successfully adopted this new approach, others have not. When we visited a number of lessons, we agreed that although there were some improvements, particularly in English, they were not consistent enough across all subjects and year groups. For example, a minority of teachers were not commenting on students' poor presentation when they marked their work. As a result, some students' books were very scruffy and contained graffiti. You have robust plans in place to ensure that in the future, improvements have the impact intended across all subjects and year groups.

Governance has improved. The new acting Chair of Governors has made many swift and necessary changes. The review of governance has been undertaken and many recommendations from the review have been implemented. These changes have enabled governors to challenge the academy more effectively. For example,

governors write their probing questions well in advance of the full governing body meetings to ensure they are included in the agenda and given sufficient priority. This has resulted in the academy's leaders being held to account more robustly.

External support

The academy has benefited from the support of a range of external consultants, including effective guidance for governors. The academy commissioned a consultant to review the changes it has made so far. This review was sharp and insightful. The academy's leaders have sensibly begun to carry out some of the recommendations from this review, such as improvements to the school's action plan. However, some of the well-thought out recommendations have yet to be implemented.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector