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20 November 2015

Mr Lickiss
Unity Academy Blackpool
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Dear Mr Lickiss

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Unity Academy Blackpool

Following my visit to your academy on 5 November 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 June 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the academy council are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good academy.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the Principal, other senior leaders, pupils, one of the academy's school improvement partners, and members of the academy council to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also had a telephone discussion with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Fylde Coast Academy Trust. The academy improvement plan and self-evaluation documentation were evaluated. Activities included a tour of the academy and scrutiny of the academy's information regarding student outcomes.

Context

Since the last inspection, nine teaching staff have left the academy and 11 have joined. Those joining include a senior vice-principal with particular responsibility for

students' personal development, behaviour and welfare, a head of English, and a head of Key Stage 2.

The number of pupils on role has increased from 815 to 860 and the academy is now close to capacity.

Main findings

Leaders, managers and staff have worked extremely hard to address the areas for improvement identified in the section 5 inspection report. This has resulted in improvements to teaching and learning and to pupils' outcomes, including their behaviour and safety.

An extensive programme of professional development training, alongside opportunities to observe good practice in local good and outstanding schools, has helped to raise teachers' expectations of themselves and of their pupils.

The academy has taken advantage of its through-school status to improve transition arrangements between Key Stages 2 and 3 to ensure that teachers do not repeat work in Year 7 that has already been covered in Year 6.

To tackle shortcomings in pupils' literacy and presentation skills, the academy has updated the marking policy and introduced minimum expectations for pupil presentation. The pupils I met with all agreed that marking is much improved, is consistently applied by all teachers and is effective in improving their understanding. They say that they now take pride in their work, value the merit system for best work and wear their badges for good presentation with pride.

The newly appointed head of English is taking a lead in developing pupils' literacy skills alongside the primary and secondary literacy coordinators. Pupils, particularly the most able, are now expected to complete sustained pieces of writing, independently and across all subjects. Pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL) are receiving enhanced support from primary and secondary EAL specialists who are also available to support teachers and teaching assistants in their planning and preparation of lessons.

The pupils I met with were unanimous in their opinion that teaching and learning had improved greatly since the summer term. They said that lessons were now more challenging, interesting and fun and there was 'no more copying from books'. Two pupils talked animatedly about a mathematics lesson where they learned about ratios by making 'mocktail' drinks, and another described how much she enjoyed class discussions in English.

The pupils were keen to tell me how behaviour had also improved. They approved of the high numbers of staff on duty at breaktimes and felt that this contributed to a reduction in anti-social behaviour. School information shows that recorded incidents

of bullying and the rate of exclusions have reduced and that attendance is rising, including for pupils whose circumstances made them vulnerable.

In response to the section 5 report, the academy has enhanced its work on e-safety and cyberbullying and the students spoken to demonstrate a good awareness of how to stay safe online. However, their understanding of how to safeguard themselves and others as they encounter risks and dangers in everyday life is less secure. Although pupils have timetabled personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education lessons in Years 7 and 8, the academy relies on tutorial sessions and 'super-learning' days in Years 9, 10 and 11 to cover aspects of social development and safeguarding. This provision is patchy and needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that all pupils receive a full entitlement to high quality learning in PSHE.

Senior leadership in the academy is very strong. The senior team are visionary, highly motivated and understand fully what next steps need to be taken to move the academy forward. The development of middle leaders is supported well by opportunities to observe practice in good and outstanding schools. In addition, middle leaders now have a greater awareness of their responsibilities and accountability for pupil outcomes. Staff benefit from their engagement in joint professional development activities across the Fylde Coast Academy Trust and cross-moderation activities with schools in the Fylde Coast Teaching Alliance. Since the last inspection, one teacher has completed and one commenced the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership, and two have completed and two commenced the National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership.

The academy improvement plan addresses the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and has further points for improvement identified by the academy. However, the plan requires improvement. This is because it needs to:

- make sufficient distinction between actions and success criteria
- make clear that the persons undertaking the actions are different from those monitoring impact
- include time and financial resource implications
- articulate more effectively where actions are appropriate for particular key stages.

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

External support

The academy has taken full advantage of its partnerships to broker an extensive range of external support. This includes, amongst other things:

- support for the head of primary from a national leader of education (NLE) who is also the headteacher of an outstanding primary school
- support for the Principal from the headteacher of a good school who has also achieved a national pupil premium award
- fortnightly executive meetings with headteachers from schools in the Fylde Coast Academy Trust
- weekly meetings between the Principal and the CEO of the Fylde Coast Academy Trust
- opportunities for teachers to observe good practice in good and outstanding schools
- support from specialist leaders of education in mathematics and in design and technology
- opportunities for teachers to engage in the Fylde Coast Academy Trust professional development training programme
- teacher engagement with the Headstart training programme to support pupils' emotional resilience and behaviour management, and behaviour management training provided by the local authority.

The evidence of the impact of this support is already apparent in school information that indicates improvements in pupils' progress, the narrowing of gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, improvements in teaching, learning and behaviour and improvements in attendance.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Academy Council and the Director of Children's Services for Blackpool. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer
Her Majesty's Inspector