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Mr David Miller
Principal
The Gainsborough Academy
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Dear Mr Miller

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Gainsborough Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 9 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school. The academy should take urgent action to:

- raise expectations and aspirations of what pupils can achieve in the academy, and ensure that teachers refuse to accept work that is clearly below pupils' abilities
- increase the level of challenge pupils face through setting more demanding tasks
- improve pupils' literacy standards through a coordinated, whole-school approach, including more effective marking of literacy errors in all subjects
- ensure that members of staff are supported more effectively and held to account for their performance, in order to improve the quality of teaching.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, three members of your leadership team, the head of the English department, two representatives of the academy sponsor and the Chair and vice-chair of the Local Governing Body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. You took me on a tour of the academy to see the learning that was taking place.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit in January 2015, 11 members of staff have left the academy. Seven members of staff have joined the academy, including two assistant Principals who are seconded from another school.

Main findings

The cohort of Year 11 pupils who left the academy in summer 2015 underachieved significantly. Only one in five of the pupils left having achieved five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and mathematics. This is well below the government's minimum expectations and is well below what this group of pupils should have achieved. They underachieved because of a legacy of poor teaching and low expectations, neither of which is being addressed with sufficient urgency or success. The 2015 outcomes are significantly worse than those in 2014, when the academy was judged to require improvement. This means that you have much work to do for the academy to become good.

You have not successfully addressed the two main recommendations from my last monitoring visit. These concerned the need for teachers to: raise pupils' expectations and refuse to accept work that is clearly below the standards pupils can achieve; and increase the level of challenge pupils face. A tour of classrooms confirmed that little sustained improvement has been made in these regards. Several pupils spoken to agreed that they could produce much better work than they are routinely allowed to do. As a result, these recommendations for action remain. The standard of education in the academy will not improve until these recommendations are met.

The quality of written feedback that teachers give to their pupils has improved. I saw some very detailed, specific advice that, if acted upon, would have made a significant contribution to raising standards. However, scrutiny of exercise books showed that the feedback is not having the impact on progress that it should, as pupils do not consider it and, therefore, repeat the same mistakes in their work.

You, rightly, identify that literacy standards are too low across the academy and that this has compromised pupils' achievement in external examinations. Improving literacy standards must be a key priority for you and your colleagues.

There has been a history in the academy of acknowledging pupils' slow rates of progress, particularly when pupils begin their GCSE courses, and then implementing a large number of interventions to address this issue. This is unsustainable, especially as the effectiveness of the interventions is not quality assured. The emphasis must be on improving the quality of teaching in regular lessons. Teachers should be given the appropriate balance of support and challenge, in order to achieve this. Senior leaders' current judgements on the quality of teaching in the academy are overgenerous.

You have provided opportunities for pupils to raise their aspirations by visiting colleges and linking with employers. This is a positive change.

Two governors have left and three others have joined the local governing body since the monitoring visit in January. The local governing body benefits from the expertise of a wide range of professionals. The Chair and vice-chair are well informed about the quality of education in the academy and the issues that they and other senior leaders face. This has been achieved through observing learning, surveying the opinions of members of staff and pupils, and through challenging the reports with which they are presented. Governors accept that the academy is underperforming significantly and they are determined to improve the life chances of pupils.

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's sponsor, the Lincoln College Group, appointed an interim Principal in January, who was then recruited permanently to his position in March. They have undertaken several actions intended to improve the academy. However, many of the actions are high-level strategic decisions and organisational reviews that incorporate the sponsor's other providers. These are necessary for success in the medium and long term, but have not been reflected in the urgent, classroom-based changes that are vital. The Chief Executive Officer is determined to improve outcomes for pupils and acknowledges that some fundamental short-term improvements have not been made.

The sponsor provided effective careers advice and guidance to the Year 11 pupils who left the academy in 2015, which resulted in all of them having a destination for their next steps, although the sponsor's representatives acknowledge that the pupils would have had more options open to them had they achieved their potential.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Local Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Lincolnshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ian McNeilly
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector