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8 December 2015

Mr G Renwick
Headteacher
William Brookes School
Farley Road
Much Wenlock
TF13 6NB

Dear Mr Renwick

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to William Brookes School

Following my visit to your academy on 24 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 January 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 in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and other leaders, representatives from the governing body and the school improvement adviser from the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. Two observations of teaching were carried out jointly with senior leaders to look at the impact of your strategies to improve teaching, learning and assessment in the academy. I met with a group of pupils from Years 7 and 8 to find out their views on the support they receive to help them to improve their reading and literacy skills. The updated post-inspection action plan was evaluated. A range of other documentation was reviewed, including the updated child protection policy as well as information on the achievements and attendance of pupils currently in the academy.

Context

Since the last inspection, a reorganisation of senior leaders' roles has taken place following the appointment of your new deputy headteacher who started in September. This additional member of the senior leadership team provides increased capacity to monitor the work of the academy.

Main findings

Leaders are taking more decisive action to improve the academy and a more rapid pace of improvement now exists than was seen at the time of the last inspection.

Support to improve literacy across the school had only very recently been introduced at the last inspection and required refinement. The literacy strategy is now in place for all pupils in Key Stage 3, with targeted support for the weakest groups in Key Stage 4. One group to benefit from this support is disadvantaged pupils, a group that has significantly underachieved in the past. Literacy difficulties are accurately assessed because leaders have carefully chosen a suitable baseline test and appropriate support is then matched to pupils' needs. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 appreciate this additional help they are given and say they enjoy having a reading book and using the quizzes to check on what they remember on finishing their book. They are proud of the badges they have been awarded for success in these quizzes and they appreciate the range of other awards and certificates they receive. The weakest readers have a pupil mentor from Key Stage 4 or the sixth form and they say this is helping them to become better readers. Support for pupils in the 'golden group' continues to improve. Teaching assistants, chosen to work with this group, have been trained to deliver a catch-up programme based on a phonics (the sounds letters make) approach. Some early signs of impact are being seen as pupils who started literacy support in the summer term are already reported to have improved their reading age so that it is closer to their actual age.

Teachers continue to receive support to help them to develop their practice through opportunities to work with other colleagues, such as in joint planning and delivery of topics. At the last inspection, finding the time for teachers to observe each other was presenting a barrier to the success of this strategy. This has now been resolved, and teachers now have dedicated time over the year to share their practice with others. Support plans are provided for teachers where this is needed, and these are linked to specific targets for improvement. From observations of teaching carried out during the inspection, the support given to these teachers is starting to make a difference and is helping them to improve their skills. Training for all teachers has been delivered on how to plan more effectively to meet the needs of different pupils. Senior leaders check on how well these ideas are being implemented in their observations of teaching.

Following a successful trial by the English department in using the new GCSE grades to monitor progress from Year 7 to Year 11, academy leaders are exploring how to develop assessment and report to parents without the use of National Curriculum levels. Pupils are becoming familiar with the new system but they like to 'convert back' to the old level to give them a better idea of the progress they have made. Further work is planned with the main feeder primary schools to ensure greater coherence between the two phases of education in the systems used to track progress.

The child protection policy, identified as needing improvement at the last inspection, has been updated and improved as required. A phone number is now given for staff to use to make a direct referral to children's social care should they need it, and there are now more explicit links between other relevant policies such as bullying. The procedure for managing allegations against staff and allegations against other pupils or volunteers is now included.

Although the school is improving, there are still areas that have not been addressed as quickly as they should. Pupil premium funding is not being used effectively enough to narrow the gaps that exist in the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils in mathematics compared with others nationally. In 2015, these already wide gaps widened further. School leaders do not know enough about why disadvantaged pupils in mathematics are underachieving, yet the same pupils in English make much better progress and reach higher standards.

Governors do not know whether these gaps are showing signs of improvement for disadvantaged pupils currently in the academy, particularly for Key Stage 3, as this information is not presented to them. Governors receive a huge amount of information on attainment but less on progress for pupils in the academy. Governors would appreciate being presented with the key information they need to see whether improvements are happening quickly enough to stop disadvantaged pupils from continuing to underachieve.

Parents do not have access to up-to-date information via the academy website. Many of the policies provided either need reviewing or, where they have been reviewed, old policies have not been replaced with the most recent information. Some policies are overly detailed and are not presented in a way that is easy for parents to understand.

Although the academy action plan has been colour-coded so that governors can see what actions have been taken, it is not clear which member of staff has led these particular actions and who is responsible for monitoring the impact or evaluating the quality of the outcome. Some further refinement is still needed to make sure this becomes a more strategic document for governors to hold staff to account.

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 from the school improvement adviser is of good quality and based on an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy. Support is planned for subject leaders to ensure they are more focused on the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection, in particular improvements that are needed in teaching in their area.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Shropshire and as below.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- The Education Funding Agency (EFA): hns.efa@education.gsi.gov.uk
- School.NOTIFICATIONS@education.gsi.gov.uk