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10 December 2015

Mrs Heather Widdup
Head of Academy
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Dear Mrs Widdup

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Retford Oaks Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 2 December 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 school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At the previous section 5 inspection, the academy 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, in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the executive principal and the head of academy, representatives of the governing body, including the Chair, a group of subject leaders, and representatives of the multi-academy trust of which the academy is a part, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I met with a group including pupils from Years 8 to 11 and learners from the sixth form and held other informal discussions with pupils. I visited several lessons in different subjects and year groups, including the sixth form. I looked at safeguarding records, the latest data available on pupils' achievement, and evaluated the latest version of the academy's action plan.

Context

There have been significant changes at the academy since the inspection, particularly in senior leadership. A new executive principal has been appointed, with overall responsibility for the academy. A head of academy has been appointed and is in charge of the day-to-day running of the academy; this is a new post. Several other members of staff have joined the academy since the inspection.

Main findings

You and the new senior leadership team have taken action quickly and focused the staff at the academy on improving the quality of teaching. You have introduced a simple but simultaneously sophisticated mechanism, the teacher toolkit, and used it systematically and progressively as a practical and very effective way of implementing a well-conceived strategy for improving the academy. The academy's action plan shows that you have made an extensive response to the areas for improvement from the inspection. I discussed with you a few minor improvements that could be made to the plan.

The teacher toolkit has set out more clearly than before the minimum standards expected by the academy. The members of staff with whom I met understood, valued and are responding to that clarity. In addition, the toolkit has provided a focus for the professional development of the staff. I saw clear evidence of how the toolkit is helping the teachers to improve lessons. I saw further evidence of how it is helping them to develop new approaches to teaching and to spread best practice amongst the staff.

The teacher toolkit has helped you to introduce approaches throughout the academy to things such as the development of the pupils' literacy skills. It has helped the teachers to plan lessons that are now focused more clearly on what the pupils are intended to learn. It has resulted also in the teachers using the academy's marking policy more consistently. These improvements are having a positive effect on the pupils' motivation, their understanding of what they are learning, and their ability and willingness to transfer learning from one subject to another. In particular, the pupils appreciated the simple fact that, when the teachers mark their work, they are now being praised for things that they have done well. This has made an important contribution to increasing their self-esteem and consequently their motivation to learn.

The latest attendance figures for the academy show notable improvements from last year. You are better able now to provide evidence of successful support for individual pupils whose attendance is low. The various actions that you have taken are having a positive impact generally on the pupils' understanding of the importance of attendance. The pupils are very aware of the things that you have done.

The academy continues to face some significant challenges. The latest available national data on pupils' achievement, though provisional, show that the pupils' achievement is still not good enough. The difference between how well disadvantaged pupils do compared with others is too wide. You have recognised the issues and, for example, as part of a revised approach to supporting disadvantaged pupils, you have communicated with the staff more openly about the funding that is available to assist those pupils.

Subject leaders have appreciated the greater openness about such matters and more generally and it is helping them to think about how to tackle the issues that the academy faces. Here also, the teacher toolkit has been beneficial. It has given subject leaders a sharper understanding of their responsibilities and also an effective structure for managing and improving the teaching in their departments. Taken together, the greater openness in communications and the clarity and structure brought by the teacher toolkit are helping subject leaders to do their jobs more purposefully.

The improved communications from senior leaders are assisting the governing body also to make a greater contribution to improving the academy. The governing body is now making its expectations clearer and taking a close interest in the improvements that are being made, holding leaders and managers at all levels more closely 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

The multi-academy trust has been instrumental in bringing about the changes in the senior leadership of the academy. The appointment of the executive principal means that a close, firm and permanent link has been established between Retford Oaks and another, outstanding academy. That link is central to the trust's strategy for ensuring appropriate and continuing external support for Retford Oaks.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Nottinghamshire, the Chief Executive of the Diverse Academies Trust and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Clive Moss
Her Majesty's Inspector