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Miss J Mason
Principal
Hele's Trust
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Dear Miss Mason

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hele's Trust

Following my visit to your academy on 9 October 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 May 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 the principal, other senior leaders, students and the chair of governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The academy action plans were evaluated. The academy's information on students' progress and the work in a sample of students' books were examined. In addition, short visits to 14 lessons were made jointly with senior leaders.

Context

Since the s5 inspection the previous principal has retired. A previous vice-principal took up the substantive post of principal in September 2015. She has restructured the senior leadership team. A new head of English was appointed from within the academy in April 2015.

Main findings

The new principal and leadership team are raising teachers' expectations of students' achievement by setting more challenging targets for their progress. To address the areas for improvement identified in the section 5 inspection, they have put in place a range of suitable strategies to develop students' literacy skills. These include: debating and book clubs, lessons in handwriting and phonics (letters and the sounds that they make) for students in Year 7 to Year 10 who need additional support, and daily reading sessions for students in Years 7 to 9, which are supported by sixth form students, teachers, associate staff and teaching assistants. In subjects across the curriculum, there is an increased focus on students using appropriate subject vocabulary, on reading fiction and non-fiction texts, and on producing more extended writing. The teaching of these skills is particularly effective in some subjects, for example history and modern foreign languages, although it is not yet strong in all subjects.

The literacy strategies are beginning to improve students' reading and writing, as evident in their books and in the way they apply their skills in lessons across the curriculum. Students say they enjoy activities such as arguing their point of view in Spanish and giving PowerPoint presentations in physics. In mathematics, they engage in explaining their methods and in preparing teaching aids for other students. They say that these activities help to clarify their thinking about the subject.

Sixth form students found the extended writing required in their courses difficult because they had not been prepared well enough for this during Key Stage 4. Students studying geography at A level praised their teacher for spending a few lessons teaching them how to structure an essay. They say this was invaluable and that they refer back to the model provided.

Recently reviewed schemes of work for English lessons focus appropriately on developing students' use of language. However, there are not enough opportunities in the lessons for students to apply and consolidate their new skills. Students sometimes find it difficult to recall their learning as they move on too quickly to the next objective.

The academy's evaluation of students' progress and attainment indicates some improvement in English. However, progress in this subject remains below that in mathematics and below the national average, even though students' literacy skills on entry to the school are not typically weak. Disabled students and those with special educational needs or low prior attainment make the same progress as all others nationally with the same starting points due to the successful support they receive. The gap in achievement in English between disadvantaged students and others in the academy is closing, but remains low when compared to students with the same starting points nationally. The most-able students do not make enough progress.

The variation in the progress of different groups of students in English is because teachers are not making effective use of assessment. They tailor their lessons to the level of students within a set, but do not check regularly for any misconceptions or to identify students who are ready to extend their learning. Teachers' assessment of students' attainment and progress is inaccurate and overgenerous. Senior leaders have arranged suitable support in this from other schools.

Students are eager to learn and demonstrate positive working relationships with each other and with their teachers. They respond well to teachers' marking, which is improving and is helping them to know precisely what to do to improve their work.

Due to improvements in the information on students' achievement, governors now have an accurate view of the academy's performance. In addition, governors visit the academy regularly to gain a first-hand overview of students' learning in lessons and in their books. Governors say that the academy had become too insular in the past. They encourage senior leaders to work with other schools and are keen to support teachers' continuing professional development. They hold senior leaders appropriately to account for the standards reached as the academy gives them regular updates on students' progress.

The action plans for literacy and English are appropriate, comprehensive and contain measurable success criteria to aid governors and senior leaders in evaluating the improvements and ensuring that they are sustainable. The evaluation of students' achievement, however, is not taken into consideration enough in evaluating the quality of teaching.

Additional priorities for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning in English by:
 - developing teachers' skills in assessing accurately students' progress and attainment
 - using assessment effectively in lessons to secure good progress for all students, especially the most able
 - providing a wider range of opportunities for students to apply and extend their skills in reading, writing and communication.

- Increase the focus on the impact of teaching on students' progress and attainment when monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching.

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 senior leaders are drawing on a range of suitable external support. The support includes working with the South West Teaching School Alliance to improve assessment and moderation, working with a commercial company to improve the tracking of progress at Key Stage 4 and the accuracy of predictions, and working with an identified outstanding English department in a local school. In addition, senior leaders are working with Challenge Partners to improve their skills in monitoring and evaluating the impact of teaching on students' achievement. As the academy has only recently started to work with these external partners, it is too early to see the impact on school improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Frater

Her Majesty's Inspector