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Ms Heidi Brown
Bexhill High Academy
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Dear Ms Brown

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Bexhill High Academy

Following my visit to your school on 28 September 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 school 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 April 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and trustees 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 met with you, other senior leaders, a group of middle leaders and the chair of the board of trustees to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plans and visited lessons, where it was useful to be able to see students at work and speak to them. I also observed the academy at breaktimes and spent time scrutinising other documentation, such as your analyses of current students' assessment information, the latest set of GCSE results and your revised literacy action plan.

Main findings

From the beginning of the academic year leading up to the inspection which took place in April 2015, academy leaders, staff and students have navigated significant and necessary change. After the academy was judged to require special measures in 2013, a succession of interim leaders gave way to permanent postholders, including the Principal in September 2014. Moreover, new sponsors took over the governance of the academy in December 2014, from which point progress has begun to accelerate much more securely.

Leaders have built sensibly on the Ofsted judgement that the academy requires improvement. There was no sense of surprise; their self-evaluation reflects fully an understanding that there is still much to be achieved, and urgently. Importantly, no time has been wasted. A comprehensive and well-judged development plan has been adjusted, where necessary, to address successfully the identified priorities from the last inspection report. In particular, the need to raise GCSE results to meet and then exceed national levels is an immediate priority. Leaders anticipated a drop in results this year, which was not as low as expected, but nevertheless reinforces their recognition that time is at a premium. Timescales are realistic and routine monitoring of the plan at sensible intervals is taking place. Staff at all levels recognise that there is no room for complacency despite the fact that the academy is no longer in a category of concern. A palpable sense of 'optimistic' urgency permeates the academy, much of which is underpinned by the Principal's powerful vision for success coupled with sensible and uncomplicated systems to support teachers to teach well and students to achieve their best.

Trustees are influential and knowledgeable. They understand what makes for successful learning. For example, their recognition of the importance of an effective learning environment and their pursuit of structural surveys to inform their insistent representations for additional capital funding have yielded considerable success. Since the inspection in April 2015, a sizeable sum of extra funding to convert large teaching 'pods' to smaller conventional teaching rooms with solid walls, has been confirmed. At the time of this visit, renovation work was well underway, with some classrooms, such as in science, already fully functioning and to good effect. During my visits to science classes, I was able to see students benefiting well from the opportunity to enjoy their learning and concentrate without interruption, in the new smaller purpose-built laboratories. Included in the redesign, is the creation of a much-needed library which, when completed, will complement trustees' strong plans to improve students' levels of literacy. Trustees recognise that as a lone strategy, this will not raise students' literacy levels. Nevertheless, to date there has been no library facility at all within the academy.

To improve the quality of teaching, leaders have wisely focused on ensuring that support for all teachers is tailored to individuals' needs. A forensic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of teaching has begun to make its mark. Leaders observe teaching frequently. Teachers receive feedback on what works well and what needs

to improve. Areas for improvement are incorporated into teachers' performance management targets. Senior leaders have ensured that observations are conducted jointly with subject leaders. This common sense approach is enabling subject leaders to develop their skills while also ensuring that their valuable subject expertise informs judgements about the standards of students' work and the depth of their knowledge and skills. Some teachers have felt uncomfortable with such high expectations and close scrutiny of their work and have since left the academy. However, those who remain are committed fully to the vision; they are not work-shy and want to improve their practice.

The appointment of lead practitioners within each faculty since Easter is now enabling the development of subject-specific training materials to help teachers address identified weaknesses in GCSE performance across all subject areas. Although it is too soon to judge the precise effectiveness of these strategies, assessment information concerning Key Stage 3 students points to better rates of progress than in the past. During my visits to lessons, despite acoustic interference across the large, partitioned teaching areas which await redesign, students looked smart, well-equipped and engaged positively with their learning. There was good evidence of teachers implementing the 'Bexhill 5' learning strategy (an expectation of all teachers, which includes the need to challenge the most able students) although not all the learning objectives displayed during my visit illustrated what skills students were expected to learn and some only identified tasks.

Strategies to build the capacity of middle leaders have been well received and are yielding success. For example, several have already benefited from linking with successful practitioners at the local teaching school. Many subject leaders are new in post and are keen to make their mark. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and accountabilities and recognise that further improvements in students' achievement are necessary. In particular, they feel both challenged and supported well by senior leaders to provide leadership by example to teachers in their subject areas. They value the appointment of lead practitioners whose work, they feel, is helping teachers to raise their game. Several stated that they use the same line-management approach adopted by senior staff when calling their subject team members to account, for example in relation to issues such as the need to meet deadlines or adhere to the departmental development plans. The explicit modelling of leadership behaviours by senior team members is greatly valued by the middle leaders with whom I met. They strongly believe that this is helping support greater consistency and improvements in students' responses to issues such as completion of homework, attendance and attitudes to learning.

Since the inspection in April 2015, important changes have been made to the ways in which students are supported to learn. In particular, students are now registered within a 'house' structure and led in small, mixed-age groups by a tutor who monitors their achievement and attendance. 'House' achievements are celebrated and rewarded, to promote a sense of healthy competition and belonging. Students

were involved in the naming of the new houses and the selection of a new uniform. Although it is early days, staff with whom I met feel very positive about these changes. Many attribute to the new uniform a renewed sense of pride in the academy's students that was not very evident in the past. During this visit, students presented themselves as smart and purposeful. Early indications suggest that their attitudes to learning are improving in response to the improvements to the environment and to the quality of teaching. For example, at a recent meeting for parents, designed to help them support their child's learning, each of the 40 targeted students and their parents were in attendance. This has not happened in the past. Equally, necessary changes to the timetable and the ways in which subjects have been organised this year are already yielding big improvements in students' attendance in Key Stage 4, which in the past has been considerably below average. Parental responses, too, show signs of renewed confidence in the leadership of the academy, with attendance figures at a series of meetings run by the Principal this term showing a far greater turnout than in the past.

External support

Leaders continue to draw wisely and selectively on a range of external support, including from the local authority. In particular, support from the local teaching school has focused on building the capacity of middle leaders and has successfully enabled the academy's middle leaders to begin to learn from best practice elsewhere. This has taken the form of input to the academy's training programme by more experienced and successful middle leaders from elsewhere, coupled with the provision of off-site visits for Bexhill's middle leaders to more successful schools within the area. Without exception, leaders with whom I met recognise the importance of improving students' levels of literacy and implementing successfully the agreed literacy plan. Leaders would now benefit from opportunities to learn from similar schools or academies which have secured success in this specific area.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the Director of Children's Services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer

Her Majesty's Inspector