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Mr Andrew Hubble
Principal
Robert Owen Academy
Blackfriars Street
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Herefordshire
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Dear Mr Hubble

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Robert Owen Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 12 January 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the academy's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to have serious weaknesses in May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the Principal, teachers, pupils, governors and members of the Robert Owen Academies Trust. Short visits to a number of lessons were undertaken. Several documents were evaluated, including the combined trust's statement of action and academy post-inspection action plan, the academy's self-evaluation, and minutes of trust and governing body meetings.

Context

Since the last inspection, three teachers have joined the academy, including lead teachers for mathematics and science. Trustees and governors are currently exploring the possibility of the academy joining a multi-academy trust. The academy building work has been completed and all facilities are now in use by pupils.

The quality of leadership and management at the academy

The trust's statement of action and the academy action plan have been produced as a single document which clearly sets out what needs to be done for the serious weaknesses designation to be removed. The plan rightly focuses on the key improvement areas of teaching, behaviour, attendance and leadership, and inspection findings show that demonstrable improvement is evident in most of these areas since the last inspection. However, this improvement is currently being driven more by the academy's senior leaders than by its governors or trustees.

The Principal, supported by the vice-principal, provides clear, strong leadership that is valued by staff and pupils. As a result, the academy's staff are a united team who all understand the part that they must play in improving the academy.

Teaching is improving because lessons are better planned than previously and the work or tasks build on what pupils already know and can do. Lessons are now more engaging for pupils and behaviour in class has improved as a consequence. The pupils I spoke to confirmed that teaching has improved, especially in science. They were unanimous in saying that they like and trust their teachers and that they appreciate the care and support that they receive from adults in the academy. All were pleased that they had moved to the academy and most intended to stay on into the sixth form.

Leaders' improved systems for collecting and analysing information has enabled them to target support and intervention to those pupils who need it most. This has contributed to better behaviour and also to improved attendance, which is 10% higher than last year. However, attendance remains well below national figures and is still a key improvement focus.

Outcomes for pupils in 2015 were very disappointing, with only one pupil achieving five GCSEs graded A* to C including English and mathematics. Outcomes in English and mathematics were a little better than the headline figure suggests, with the greatest underachievement occurring in science, information technology and humanities. These poor outcomes were a result of some poor teaching in the academy, but also because many pupils entered the academy in Year 10 with a legacy of underachievement, poor behaviour and irregular attendance at their previous schools. The academy's own assessment information, supported by external moderation, indicates that outcomes are likely to be much better in 2016, although they are also likely to fall some way short of national averages.

Trustees and governors are fully committed to the vision for a successful vocational academy in Hereford and they bring a wide range of expertise to their roles. However, the blurring of roles between trustees and governors reported at the last inspection still remains. Distinctions between the two roles are still not clear, with the governors and trustees whom I met giving different interpretations of their roles and responsibilities. The reviews of governance and use of the pupil premium, recommended in May 2015, have still not taken place, although the most recent delay was beyond the academy's control. The academy has been too slow to address this.

Joint trust and governing body meetings and sub-committees comprising both trustees and governors contribute to the lack of clarity between their respective roles. The academy's post-inspection action plan is reviewed by trustees and governors at their meetings. However, these meetings are lengthy, with many other agenda items and as a result, trustees and governors are not sufficiently focused on those actions that are most important to ensuring the removal of the serious weaknesses designation. Trustees' and governors' monitoring of the impact of the plan is neither robust nor sharp enough.

The academy is receiving valuable support from John Kyrle High School. This comprises professional support for the Principal from a national leader of education and subject-specific support in English, mathematics and science. A national leader of governance is to conduct a review of governance shortly.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The combined trust's statement of action and academy improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector