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Mr Philip Karnavas
Executive Principal
The Canterbury Academy
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Dear Mr Karnavas

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Canterbury Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 17 May 2016, 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 October 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 good. The academy should take further action to:

- ensure that the academy's management systems are very sharp; this includes making the success criteria in the improvement plan more precise; making more in-depth evaluations of teaching and learning; developing assessments of pupils where there is no data; and analysing in detail the impact of pupil premium expenditure.

Evidence

During the inspection visit, I met with you and other senior leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also held meetings and discussions with other leaders, local governors and a local authority officer. With senior staff, I visited several lessons, speaking with some pupils and looking at samples of their written and practical work. I observed pupils as they moved around the academy and as

they left at the end of the day. I scrutinised key documents, including the academy improvement plan and self-evaluations, assessments made of pupils, records of monitoring visits and governing body documents.

Context

The academy has sustained a stable staffing position since the inspection. The academy is successful in recruiting well-qualified specialist staff across the very wide range of subjects and disciplines it offers.

Main findings

The academy sustains its clear sense of moral purpose, namely to meet closely the very diverse needs and aspirations of a large pupil body. Its vision to be a 'school for all talents' is formidable and complex. The passionate and inclusive attitude from the senior leadership is well understood and applied across the academy. The academy's curriculum is remarkable in including a huge variety of subjects and routes. Many courses and subjects are taught by staff with industry experience and qualifications in well-organised, bespoke teaching areas. For example, construction, hair and beauty and dance lessons take place in well-appointed professional environments. The school has excellent sports and arts facilities, which are in constant use.

Using guidance from staff, which they greatly value, pupils choose from a broad range of appealing and relevant traditionally academic and practical options. They can mix and match these subjects at key stage 4 and post-16 to suit their particular ambitions and interests. Pupils like the school because it really meets their needs and emerging aspirations. For example, pupils with high academic ability and also interests in sport or the arts are very well catered for through the options available. Across the school, pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning continue to be good, as reported at the inspection. The rate of exclusion is low. The destinations of pupils when they leave the academy at age 16, 17 or 18 are very positive. Very few of the pupils do not continue in worthwhile employment, education or training. This is a very important indicator of the academy's success in preparing pupils for a wide range of futures.

You have worked hard to bring the improvements recommended at the inspection. Much successful work has been done by senior and middle leaders and staff to improve and refine teaching. The teaching I observed in GCSE English and mathematics lessons was well focused. With senior staff, I observed lessons in all year groups and many different subjects. In all cases, the teaching was clear and positive. Pupils responded to it well and showed interest in their work. When appropriate, they were keen to help each other and work together. In accordance with the academy's systems, they knew clearly what they were trying to learn and how they could be successful.

Nevertheless, there remain further improvements to be made in teaching. In some lessons, staff follow the school's requirements on setting objectives for pupils, and pupils assessing themselves, so closely that it has the simultaneous effect of both promoting and limiting the pupils' learning. In a well-ordered physical education lesson observed, for example, pupils benefited from offering each other feedback on their performance in running. This was valuable but it took up so much time that the pupils were not very physically active in the lesson. They spent more time talking together than they did practising their running and keeping fit. It is important now that teachers feel they can use the strategies the school is encouraging them to use with some flexibility, to maximise the benefits and minimise any restrictions.

The academy monitors teaching usefully and this helps to bring further improvement. Staff performance management is organised correctly. But the academy needs to become sharper still in its evaluation of teaching and learning, so that there is more focus still on how well pupils actually learn.

The academy is developing a link with a nearby grammar school well. Both schools gain, but a particular benefit to The Canterbury Academy is raising aspirations of the pupils especially in more traditional academic subjects. All teachers now use 'purple files'. These provide them with useful information about the pupils in each of their classes. Much of this information is data in numerical form. This is helpful; it has helped staff to increase their expectations of pupils. You reasonably expect that more pupils will achieve higher grades in this summer's examinations, in Year 11 and post-16, than in previous years. However, much as the 'purple file' data is useful, it can also be limiting and may not always be fully reliable. We discussed ways in which some of the assessments you want to make of pupils might be better made in different formats. Where staff are using written descriptors of pupils' progress or needs, for example, this is proving in some ways more valuable.

The governing body, known as the academy board of directors, is completing its external review as recommended at the inspection. This is helping to sharpen up the challenge that directors make to the academy. The directors themselves realise how important this is and they recognise the need to continue to develop their work further. Under a new, better focused, system of committees, members have an increasingly detailed knowledge of the academy's work. For instance, they know that disadvantaged pupils, entitled to pupil premium support, could achieve better than they do. They are rightly keen to ensure that the outcomes of the recent independent review of the academy's use of pupil premium funding are put into practice and that the impact of these changes is carefully monitored.

The academy evaluates itself honestly and accurately. Its improvement plan is well focused on sensible key areas of work. It shows the inclusive ethos of the academy excellently. However, in areas of work where there is no hard data, its targets or success criteria are imprecise. They are difficult to measure. It is most important that this should be addressed, so that the academy can tell its unique story, and learn any needed lessons, using very good management information.

In overall summary, the academy is doing the right things in making true its strong moral purpose. Its pupils are in many ways very fortunate and those I spoke with know it. The senior and middle leaders of the school are working more and more successfully. They are an increasingly strong team. You have made sensible plans for future succession planning. The academy needs to ensure that all of the management processes which underpin its work and vision are constantly very sharp and robust.

External support

The local authority provides valuable advice, support and monitoring to the academy, which is well received. The academy works closely and effectively with many other providers of education and other services.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector