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Mr Darren Gelder
Principal
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Dear Mr Gelder

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Grace Academy Solihull

Following my visit to your school on 16 September 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the sponsor are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to ensure that:

- pupils' progress in all subjects matches the high standards now achieved in English and mathematics
- pupils are able to study foreign languages as part of their curriculum
- comprehensive written records are kept for all safeguarding incidents.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the you and other senior leaders, including the designated safeguarding lead, the chair of the academy interim board (AIB) and a representative of the sponsor, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school's action plan was evaluated in addition to several other documents about pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour. I also joined you on a tour of the school, where we made brief visits to several lessons.

Context

Since the previous inspection, four teachers have left the school and all have been replaced. Two assistant principals have been promoted to become vice principals. You have recently become the executive principal of Grace Academy Coventry.

Main findings

The improvement in the school, reported in the previous monitoring inspection in July 2015, has accelerated in the intervening 14 months. Increasing evidence of this improvement is now apparent.

The school is now fully staffed with subject specialists in all departments. Leaders' clear focus on improving teaching, that started with establishing basic expectations, has moved on to ensuring that teachers plan activities that are well matched to what pupils already understand, know and can do. Leaders' monitoring of teaching is rigorous and teachers understand their accountability for their pupils' outcomes. As a consequence of these actions, pupils' progress continues to improve in all years and across most subjects. Unvalidated GCSE results for 2016 show a sharp improvement for the second consecutive year, especially in English, mathematics and science. Disadvantaged pupils' results improved by more than those of other pupils. Consequently, differences between the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally have diminished. In some subjects, including English, there is no longer any difference. Leaders are well aware that, despite some improvement, pupils' progress remains less strong in some subjects including history, geography and technology.

Outcomes in the sixth form also improved in 2016. For example, the proportion of students achieving three A levels rose to 69%, having been 50% in 2015 and just 34% in 2014. More students are now completing their sixth-form courses because better advice and guidance are ensuring that they do not embark on inappropriate qualifications. Improved careers advice and guidance, in the main school, resulted in all students who left Year 11 in 2016 moving on to education, employment or training.

Attendance improved considerably during the last academic year to be broadly average when compared with secondary schools nationally. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils improved by even more than that of others and so the difference between their attendance and that of other pupils diminished considerably. Leaders secured this improvement by carefully targeting tailored strategies at different groups of pupils. For example, a member of staff was employed to mentor disadvantaged pupils and support their parents. Short-term targets and rewards were used in Years 7 and 8, while focused careers guidance encouraged older pupils to attend more regularly.

Leaders reviewed the school's behaviour policy in January 2016 when they identified that current practice was not seeing behaviour improve speedily enough. They launched a revised policy that focuses on encouraging pupils to reflect on their poor behaviour and the impact that it has on themselves and others. All members of staff were trained in using the revised policy. Consequently, since January 2016, fixed-term exclusions have almost halved, as have incidents of poor behaviour. Repeated exclusions are now much rarer than previously because pupils learn their lesson and tend not to repeat poor behaviour.

Leaders and governors are determined to see the school continue to improve. Their use of assessment and other information is thorough and their evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses is comprehensive and detailed, as are their improvement plans. Leaders are aware that the absence of any foreign language within the curriculum is a significant weakness and they are currently planning for its reintroduction. Leaders and governors have a clear and appropriate focus on ensuring that pupils are safe in school. However, some aspects of record-keeping, such as ensuring that minutes of safeguarding meetings are obtained, kept and filed, need to be strengthened.

External support

Leaders and governors have successfully sourced a range of effective external support to address specific needs. Sponne Academy has provided support, in English and mathematics, with leadership, coaching, moderation of assessments and quality assurance. Tuxford Academy provided a senior leader to the school, initially to support with developing teaching, and later with behaviour and attendance. The Lincoln Schools' Teaching Alliance has also provided support for the English and mathematics departments. The local authority has supported leaders in establishing quality assurance systems.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the AIB, the regional schools commissioner

and the director of children's services for Solihull. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector