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Mr Richard Billings
Principal
Towers School and Sixth Form Centre
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Dear Mr Billings

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Towers School and Sixth Form Centre

Following my visit to your school on 7 November 2017, 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 October 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in 2016, the school was also judged to require improvement.

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

The school should take further action to:

- tighten the school's action plans so that they have clearly defined success criteria that can be monitored for impact
- strengthen further governors' understanding of how additional funding is used and the difference it makes to pupils.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you and members of the leadership team, members of the governing body, staff and pupils to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Together with school leaders, I visited a number of classrooms and looked at pupils' books. I spoke by telephone with a representative of the local authority who works with the school. I also looked at a range of documentation, including your action plans, evaluations of the school's work and information associated with safeguarding and child protection.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, there have been changes to the leadership and governance of the school. There are now three assistant principals, roles created following the previous inspection. There is also a new chair of the governing body and new governors, following a number of resignations. Fourteen members of staff have left the school and 19 have joined the school.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, you have established a clear and ambitious vision for the school. You have inspired your staff and pupils to raise their aspirations and, as a consequence, a passion for success may be seen throughout the school. You and your senior leaders have established high academic and behavioural expectations for every member of your community. You have transformed the culture of the school by your effective work to embed clear processes to support behaviour, teaching and learning. Pupils and staff are excited to be part of Towers and can see the rapid progress that they are making. Pupils like the fact that staff at Towers are 'strict because [you] care' and they rise to meet the high expectations that have been established. Although behaviour was already judged to be good in the previous inspection, pupils told me that it was 'even better' now and that they could focus on their learning and so make faster progress.

Following the inspection, you extended the leadership team, including middle leadership. You established clear lines of accountability and closer monitoring of actions. This has helped to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. Those staff I spoke with were very positive about the way that leaders base their decisions on evidence from research. Staff feel that leaders are always open to other ideas and challenge, and value all contributions. Staff have confidence that the changes and decisions that leaders make are in the best interests of the school and its pupils. As a result, the capacity of school leaders to manage school improvement is secure. However, you recognise the need to refine your action plans so that your intended impacts are clear and can be more easily measured. This should also support governors in their role of holding leaders to account.

A key action you have taken with your leadership team is to use research to create a 'knowledge-based curriculum' and a common structure for learning. This has successfully driven the improvement of teaching and learning across the school. You have trained staff well to increase their expectations of pupils' depth and breadth of knowledge. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses across the school and have provided high-quality support where required. Where standards were low, they have now improved, especially in mathematics, where pupils' progress is accelerating. Staff told me that the training and support have been 'inspirational' and have helped them to improve. The development work in faculties has also helped to spread effective teaching across the school. Pupils like the consistent structures and expectations and can explain how they know that they are making progress. From my scrutiny of pupils' books, I could see that many pupils are given differentiated work that challenges and stretches them to make rapid progress.

Leaders have also refined the assessment policy and embedded it successfully across the school. Leaders have sharpened teachers and pupils' sense of drive and purpose by creating clear series of lessons and activities that build towards routine assessment. Pupils like the regular assessments and 'knowledge checks,' and the way that homework is tightly linked to their current learning.

Alongside the school's improving overall standards, which can be seen reflected in the school's 'best ever' GCSE results in 2017, you have improved the progress of pupils who are disadvantaged. You are determined to continue this journey of improvement so that all pupils make the best possible progress from their starting points. The actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning overall have supported disadvantaged pupils. They have also benefited from the high-quality pastoral support, which has improved their attendance. Staff have established close working relationships with families, which have also helped to improve pupils' attendance. School achievement information indicates that the gender gap has closed in all year groups. However, the high expectations for pupils' presentation of their work were not consistent in the sample of pupils' books that I looked at. Often, boys' books did not show the same pride that could be seen in girls' books.

The reorganisation of the governing body has helped governors to improve their focus on school improvement. Governors have developed their understanding and skills, with many undertaking training, including for specific responsibilities such as the use of the pupil premium. Governors are now linked with specific areas in the school. This has helped them to understand the workings of the school while being aware that their role has to remain strategic. Governors have a secure understanding of the school's priorities and the improvements that have already been achieved. However, their understanding of leaders' use of additional funding, including the pupil premium funding, is still not crisp enough. An external review of this funding was commissioned and governors need to ensure that they act on its recommendations as a matter of urgency.

External support

School leaders have commissioned external support from a well-chosen range of sources, including Ashford Teaching Alliance, the local authority and other local schools. For example, they have used external consultants to moderate and validate assessment data to make sure that teachers have a secure understanding of the new examinations. This support has been highly effective.

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. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lucy English
Her Majesty's Inspector