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Miss Caroline Longhurst and Mrs Nicola Taylor
Co-Principals
High Weald Academy
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Dear Miss Longhurst and Mrs Taylor

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to High Weald Academy

Following my visit to your school on 3 July 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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

The school should take further action to:

- strengthen plans for the use of additional funding so that the actions can be accurately evaluated
- further improve the attendance of pupils, especially those who are persistently absent
- continue to eradicate inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and ensure that teachers apply the school's behaviour for learning policy accurately.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the co-principals, the chair and chief executive officers of the Brook Learning Trust, other members of the school leadership team, and attendance and pastoral support officers. I also met with members of the local academy council to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I met formally with a group of pupils and spoke with other pupils informally as I visited lessons. I also reviewed the school's safeguarding processes, including the single central register. I considered a wide range of documentation, including leaders' self-evaluations and school information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance.

Context

There have been many changes to staffing and leadership structures since the previous inspection. An interim principal was appointed shortly after the previous inspection. Despite many attempts, the trust was unable to recruit a substantive principal and so secured experienced leaders from within the trust who took up post as co-principals from September 2017. The trust has recently appointed an executive principal, along with a new senior vice-principal, who will take over leadership of the school from September 2018, working with another school in the trust.

Since the section 5 inspection, 27 teachers and 13 members of the support staff have left the school; 19 teachers and 17 members of the support staff have joined. The local governing body has changed its structure, now being formed into an academy council. Only two members of the original local governing body remain.

The trust has secured financial resources and planning permission for a new, purpose-built school. The build of this is due to start soon and is aimed to be open for pupils in November 2019.

Main findings

Leaders are passionate about the role of the school to provide a good quality of education for pupils. Despite numerous difficulties with the recruitment of staff, leaders have worked systematically to secure improvement at every level. They have improved the overall quality of provision through embedding their 'non-negotiables' and high expectations for all involved, whether they are pupils, staff or parents and carers. Pupils told me that the school had changed and it was 'much better' because 'behaviour and lessons are better'.

The interim leadership was effective in identifying actions that were required to improve the school, and many of these were started successfully. Due to the increased capacity once the new leadership team, led by the current co-principals,

was in place, the pace of change increased. The co-principals work very effectively together. They focus on what they describe as 'the fundamentals' and provide very successful professional development for all staff. Building on the work of the interim leadership, they have changed the culture of the school.

Leaders have engaged pupils well, especially with the careers advice and guidance programme. Pupils are aspirational and recognise the improvements across the school. They like the clear structures and expectations that leaders have established. However, they are frustrated when staff do not apply processes consistently. For example, they report that some staff skip steps or are too lenient with the behaviour for learning policy. Leaders visit every lesson every day and are working well with staff to develop consistency. They rightly identify this as a priority for improvement.

Leaders are also acutely aware of the need to eradicate remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. They have introduced a well-considered teaching and learning policy that sets out clear expectations and processes. The professional development programme has been successful in supporting many teachers to develop strong practice. Teachers know their pupils well and most use this knowledge to plan learning activities that provide a strong level of challenge. This has increased pupils' overall progress, especially of pupils who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. School information shows that current Year 11 pupils accelerated their progress in many subjects, but leaders are aware that, due to pupils' option choices, this is not likely to be reflected in published performance tables.

Work to improve the accuracy and use of assessment has been successful. Leaders have made judicious use of trust support to moderate and validate teachers' assessments of pupils' work. Assessments are now carefully designed to test how well pupils have learned what they have been taught on a cumulative basis, rather than just recall from short-term learning. The information from assessments is used routinely by teachers to adjust their planning and support for pupils. Teachers provide extra learning support or more challenging work for pupils and this is helping all pupils to make better progress.

Following a careful analysis of the sixth form, leaders and the trust took the difficult decision to suspend this provision. They worked closely with the small number of prospective Year 12 students to find them provision that met their needs well. They monitor their progress and keep in touch with them and their families as they still feel a duty of care for their progress. Year 13 students were supported to complete their courses successfully.

Work to improve pupils' attendance has had some success but this has not been rapid enough. Staff have established strong relationships with parents and carers and report an improved level of trust, especially with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. However, persistent absence remains stubbornly higher than the national average. Leaders are aware of the need to act with more urgency to address this issue.

Leaders commissioned an external review of pupil premium funding shortly after the previous inspection. The subsequent report makes many useful suggestions, especially regarding the need to ensure that the impact of activities can be measured. However, leaders have not acted swiftly enough to implement these required changes. Evaluations of the difference this money has made are not clear enough. Until recently, governors had not fulfilled their statutory duties for holding leaders to account for these monies. The trust did not monitor this work closely enough as it was delegated to the local governing body. Current leaders and governors are well aware that the quality of this work needs to improve rapidly.

An external review of governance was also commissioned following the previous inspection. The trust consequently changed the structure and responsibilities of local governance. There are now local academy councillors in place who have the skills and training required in order to support school improvement and hold leaders to account. Records of their meetings show that they are providing an increasing level of challenge that is focused on school improvement. However, this change has taken too long to secure. The new councillors understand their remit and have provided far greater challenge to leaders in the past few months. The trust now leads the 'standards panel' and provides strong challenge to leaders for pupils' progress and outcomes.

External support

Support from the trust has been effective. The trust has provided often innovative solutions to the staffing and leadership difficulties. The trust has also provided opportunities for moderation and standardisation with different schools from the trust. Officers from the trust work to support school improvement every day, with the director of education taking on the role of co-principal. They used the external review of governance to support the reorganisation of the local governing body, increase the quality of training for local academy council members and develop stronger communication with them. They are acutely aware of the work still to be done and have well-considered plans in place to increase the pace of improvement across the school.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local academy council, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, 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