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24 October 2019

Ms Alison Jobling
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Dear Ms Jobling

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Durham Community Business College for Technology and Enterprise

Following my visit to your school on 23 October 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken 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.

Senior leaders and the interim executive board are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- further improve the quality of education, by ensuring that curriculum plans consistently specify the knowledge pupils need to know and remember, and the sequence in which it should be taught
- ensure that pupils in Years 7 to 9 secure a firm foundation of knowledge, as described by the national curriculum, before they are introduced to GCSE course content
- source subject specialists to lead and teach in the mathematics faculty
- check carefully that strategies being used to address the gaps in the knowledge of older pupils are successful. In particular, ensure that more pupils attain good GCSE passes in English and mathematics.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders and a member of the interim executive board to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school's plans for improvement were evaluated. Meetings were also held with a group of faculty leaders and with pupils. Visits were made to lessons in English, mathematics and history. A range of documents were considered, including the school's vetting checks on adults who work in the school, behaviour and attendance information and records of the interim executive board's meetings.

Context

Since the last inspection, staffing has become more stable and there are currently no temporary teachers working in the school. The interim executive board continues to be the accountable body for governance. A shadow governing body has recently been appointed. This body has been set up to take over governance functions in due course. The school continues to be part of the Durham Federation. In September 2018, leaders brought pupils from both schools in the federation together on one site. The majority of lessons are taught on the Durham Community Business College for Technology and Enterprise site. Since the last inspection, the school roll has fallen below three hundred pupils. Plans to amalgamate the two schools have not progressed since the previous inspection took place.

Main findings

Leaders have made good progress in addressing most areas for improvement from the last inspection. Pupils spoken to during the inspection were unanimous that the quality of teaching is better this year. This is because staffing is much more settled than it was. Last year, there was a high turnover of teachers, with pupils being taught by a succession of temporary teachers in some subjects. This year, leaders have deployed teachers differently. This has addressed the turbulence the school suffered last year. While this is an improvement, it does mean that some teaching, in subjects such as mathematics, is being delivered by non-specialists. The training that teachers have received on how to challenge pupils has begun to have a positive effect. The most able pupils report that the content in many subjects has become more challenging. Pupils highlighted English as a subject where teachers' high expectations ensure that they are consistently stretched. Homework is being used effectively across the school to extend pupils' thinking.

Improvements in the quality of education are more obvious in English than in mathematics. In English, the curriculum is suitably ambitious and well planned. Topics make a strong contribution to building pupils' cultural awareness. Knowledge is introduced in a well-planned sequence. Curricular goals are ambitious and challenge pupils appropriately. Teachers ask searching questions, and pupils discuss topics with conviction and authority.

In mathematics, the high turnover of teachers last year means that pupils are less confident and display a more fragile understanding. Some teaching continues to lack precision. For example, teachers do not consistently use the correct subject-specific vocabulary. Opportunities in lessons to check pupils' reasoning are missed. Content is not always taught in a sensible sequence. As a result, pupils in key stage 4 do not have a secure foundation of knowledge. The subject leader has reviewed the schemes of work, and new curriculum planning for key stage 3 will be introduced after the October half-term holiday.

Behaviour is now much better than it was. Lessons are purposeful. Pupils conduct themselves well, and most are keen to take part in discussions. Disruption to lessons is now rare. Incidents of poor behaviour that result in pupils being removed from the classroom have reduced considerably. Last year, the number of exclusions reduced by half on the previous year. The reducing trend in exclusions has continued this year.

Leaders have improved attendance. The school uses an effective range of rewards and sanctions. Fewer pupils now miss school regularly. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is close to that of other pupils. Last year, overall attendance was broadly in line with the national average. Year 11 pupils are the best attenders currently. These pupils also stay on for period 7, an extra period at the end of the day. Most pupils spoken to said that they value this extra lesson, as it helps them to revisit and revise knowledge covered earlier.

Leaders acknowledge that examination results in 2019 were poor. Provisional data indicates that pupils made weak progress in a broad range of subjects. Attainment was low. Only 15% of pupils attained a good pass in English and mathematics. Although 35% of pupils were entered for the suite of subjects in the English Baccalaureate, only 2% attained the necessary standard. Leaders point to evidence that standards of attainment are better in other year groups. Nevertheless, they need to ensure that the better teaching now in place translates into higher standards of achievement in future GCSE examinations.

Leaders' intentions are clear. They have adapted the curriculum to be more ambitious than it was in the past. Around 30% of pupils in the current Year 11 and Year 10 are following the English Baccalaureate. They have also reviewed other examination courses and made changes so that there is an appropriate balance of academic and vocational options. However, in some subjects, teachers introduce GCSE content during Year 9, before pupils have covered the full content of the key stage 3 national curriculum. This means that knowledge that should be taught in key stage 3 is being omitted or covered in insufficient depth.

External support

Over the last year the local authority has provided effective support to improve the quality of teaching. It has supported some faculty leaders to develop better schemes of work. It has also provided helpful advice on how to challenge the

school's most able pupils effectively. However, the local authority has not made progress with amalgamating the two schools within the federation. This is adding to leaders' workload and represents a barrier to their efforts to improve the school. In addition, funding that could be used to strengthen provision is being wasted on maintaining the Sacriston site.

The school has very recently been successful in securing additional funding through the Department for Education's One Vision programme. Leaders have plans in place to use some of this funding to bring subject-specialists to the school on secondments. Linked to this programme is the support from a national leader of education. It is too early to evaluate how well leaders are making use of these opportunities.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector