

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 1231231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566862
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email: rcowley@cfbt.com



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Mrs Pippa Dodgshon
Headteacher
Hall Cross Academy
Thorne Road
Doncaster
DN1 2HY

Mrs Dodgshon

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit to Hall Cross Academy on 11 March 2013

Following my visit to your school on 11 March 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time 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 December 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with the headteacher and other school leaders, members of the governing body and a representative from the collaborative trust the academy is part of. Brief visits were made to several classrooms in the upper and lower school. The school's plans for improvement and various monitoring and evaluation records were also examined.

Context

Since the inspection six staff have left the academy. One member of staff remains a long term absentee due to illness. However, all of the vacant posts have been filled.

Main findings

While disappointed by the judgement the academy's leaders and governors accept the findings of the section 5 inspection and concede that the report correctly

identifies aspects of the school's work that require improvement. They have been robust in response to the gauntlet thrown down to them and have set about implementing, alongside their wider development strategy, a series of coherent strategic actions designed to improve the shortcomings identified.

The astute headteacher, with some effective support from her leadership team is resolute and pragmatic in her efforts to stimulate improvements in the academy's overall effectiveness and address its key priorities. Much work has been undertaken to raise awareness among staff of the high capabilities of many of the students the academy serves and the vital role they must play in ensuring all students realise their potential. This shift in culture and the increased understanding of students' needs it has brought, together with a heightened level of scrutiny, accountability and expectation is giving impetus to the academy's improvement drive. Staff support this new ethos and the direction the academy is moving in and are embracing the many innovations and fine-tuning of teaching, curriculum and support, custom and practices, that are taking place. Inefficiency is being more forcefully challenged and the best practice systematically shared and celebrated.

Themes for training and mentoring have appropriately revolved around improving the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress and ensuring all leaders and managers offer good value for money and fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Strategies adopted include those to: work with a partner training school; deploy their advanced skills teachers to model good practice and coach their colleagues to plan lessons that stretch and challenge all students, including the most able; become better at identifying and intervening to affect the progress of those students at risk of underachieving; integrate literacy development within all subjects; restructure the curriculum (particularly at Key Stage 3) so that students are more engaged and become independent, resilient and confident learners who acquire, develop and can readily apply, a range of key skills, knowledge and understanding appropriately.

The procedures for enhancing middle leadership capacity, tracking and evaluating the impact of the academy's work, especially in teaching, students' progress and leadership, are more rigorous and regular. The academy is also using the wealth of student performance data it collects more effectively. As a result, staff have a clearer picture of how well students are progressing towards their individual targets. This in turn, informs their planning and the degree of difficulty, support and guidance that they include in their lessons.

In conjunction with raising staff expectations the academy has made some systemic changes such as moving away from early entry in core subjects, which inhibited a significant number of the most able students' achievement. This was because many of these students did not achieve the highest grades when they were entered early. To compound matters, students who had gained perhaps a B or C grade, chose not to re-sit the exams in Year 11. This meant that they did not gain the A* or A grade they were on target to receive by the end of Year 11 and in effect underachieved.

It is clear that the academy has taken several well-conceived steps to improve its efficiency and the quality of education it provides and time will tell just how effective these measures have been. Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs of initial impact and the academy's leaders have generated a positive momentum that must be sustained and built upon if the academy is going to improve rapidly and meet the challenge of demonstrating unequivocally that it is a good or better school by the time of the next inspection.

While members of the governing body discharge their statutory responsibilities suitably they acknowledge that there is scope to exert greater strategic influence over the academy's leadership and management. In particular, they accept that they must monitor and evaluate, more routinely and with greater rigor, the progress the academy is making in addressing its areas for improvement. To this end, they are reconstituting some committees to give them a sharper focus on the key priorities. They are also looking to call middle leaders more directly to account for the roles they have. Governors have had training that has made them more discerning in their examination of the student achievement data they receive. They no longer dwell on headline figures but are starting to dig beneath the surface and consider the relative performance of different groups of students, such as the most able. These steps, alongside others, are helping them to triangulate the information they receive from senior leaders and challenge it if necessary. They are also giving governors a clearer picture of the impact of the actions being taken to improve the academy.

HMI will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The collaborative trust the academy has established with three other academies is proving useful in offering a network of mutual support, challenge and development specific to each institutions particular needs. A key benefit of this consortium is that the partners are able to pool their collective expertise, finances and other resources to assist each organisations capacity to improve more rapidly. The academy has also brokered useful partnerships with a group of local schools and specialist training providers. All of this additional support, advice, guidance and training is focussed on applying practical measures to help the academy to secure rapid improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

John Young
Her Majesty's Inspector