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9 May 2013

Trenica King
Headteacher
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CM8 2SD

Dear Ms King

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to New Rickstones Academy, Essex

Following my visit to your academy on 8 May 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 you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection on 17-18 January 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with senior leaders, members of the governing body and a representative of the academy sponsor. Checks were made on the academy's systems for monitoring the performance of pupils and staff. The academy improvement plan was evaluated, taking into account amendments made following the last inspection. A brief tour of the academy was made to talk to pupils. The feedback was attended by a representative of Essex local authority.

Context

There have been no major contextual changes since the inspection in January 2013.

Main findings

The strategy for improvement sensibly focuses on three key areas: improving the quality of teaching, helping pupils to understand the learning process and holding staff at all levels to account for their contribution to students' learning. It is based on a realistic evaluation of the academy's effectiveness by the headteacher and executive principal. As a result, the academy improvement plan has required relatively few changes in response to the inspection in January 2013.

The senior leadership team had already been restructured before the inspection, making clear who was leading the various initiatives or working with specific subjects. Since the inspection, the impact of the changes has become clearer. Steady, rather than rapid progress has been made in improving the quality of marking and the planning of work to meet different pupils' needs. At this stage, the emphasis is still on ensuring that teachers follow the agreed policies: that work is marked regularly and that lesson plans include three levels of work. Senior leaders recognise that the next stage will be to ensure that these things are consistently done well.

Senior leaders are monitoring teaching more frequently and checking pupils' work. The lesson observation records do not always give enough detail about how well pupils are learning, but they do provide evidence of better teaching. However, the academy is not yet in a position to demonstrate that pupils are making better progress as a result. Long-standing weaknesses in the systems for assessing and recording pupils' levels of attainment mean that data about past performance is not entirely reliable. The headteacher is taking urgent steps to remedy the situation, but it will take a while to build up an accurate picture of trends over time.

The governing body continues to strengthen the way it holds senior leaders to account. This is partly due to the influence of new governors and partly because governors are being provided with more information. Decisions about teachers' pay scales are now linked closely to their performance in the classroom.

Senior leaders, governors and the sponsor have begun to take effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following my visit to the academy, I recommend that further action is taken to:

- make marking more effective by ensuring that the marking policy is adapted to meet subject-specific needs, for example in mathematics
- use the database of pupils' assessments, once it is fully established, to analyse the progress of different groups of pupils, to hold teachers and subjects leaders to account and to evaluate the impact of improvement initiatives
- provide more detail in lesson observation records about pupils' learning and progress, for example on the extent of their understanding and their ability to apply their knowledge to justify their opinions and solutions to problems

Ofsted will continue to monitor the academy until its next section 5 inspection. The academy has agreed to provide regular updates on pupils' progress. A further monitoring visit will be made in approximately six months to re-assess the academy's rate of improvement.

External support

The academy is making good use of the support it is receiving from the sponsor, Academies Enterprise Trust. In particular, the mathematics and English departments are benefiting from consultant support and the headteacher is supported and challenged effectively by the executive principal and the sponsor's regional director. The academy has become more outward-looking, organising visits to other schools to observe good practice and enrolling selected teachers on the improving teacher programme. The headteacher is seeking to increase collaboration with other schools locally.

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

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector