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1 July 2013

Mrs Sarah Brinkley
Headteacher
John O'Gaunt School
Priory Road
Hungerford
RG17 0AN

Dear Mrs Brinkley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to John O'Gaunt School

Following my visit to your school on 1 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in November 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, other senior leaders, the literacy co-ordinator, and the Chair of the Governing Body to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also held a telephone discussion with a school improvement officer working on behalf of the local authority. I visited a range of lessons, accompanied by senior leaders.

Context

Since my last visit, the leadership team has been restructured and reduced by 1.5 full time equivalent posts. An experienced new head and a deputy head of English take up their posts in September, along with new heads of department in Arts and Humanities and a new head of sixth form. There will also be changes to staffing in science.

Main findings

Since taking over leadership of the school, the headteacher has raised expectations of what students can achieve and has focused the school more sharply on improving the quality of teaching. She has insisted on a keen focus on areas of weakness and held teachers and senior leaders more strongly to account for the impact they have on students' achievement. Predicted GCSE results for summer 2013 indicate that standards are likely to rise and progress in English and mathematics is likely to improve, as a result of better teaching.

Governors have reviewed their work and sharpened their approach to school evaluation as a result. They now monitor improvements across year groups rather than just within a single subject, to check the impact of initiatives across all groups of students. Every governing body meeting includes training to make sure that governors have the skills and understanding to challenge the school more effectively. This has included analysis of student performance data. Consequently, governors have a clearer view of how different groups are doing; for example, they are keeping close eye on the achievement of students eligible for free school meals, which, while improving, is not yet as strong as for other students.

Despite these improvements, a number of factors are currently impeding the school's progress towards being judged 'good'.

- Leadership of the English department has been hampered by significant long term absence. Achievement in English lessons is inconsistent. Students' books show evidence of patchy progress. Too many are not aware of their working grades, their targets, or of how to improve their work. GCSE predictions for 2013 show an improvement on last year, and gaps narrowing between different groups of students, but learning in all classes and all year groups is not improving fast enough.
- The school's use of assessment information to set targets, track students' progress and predict outcomes has not been accurate or demanding enough in the past and is being overhauled. Responsibility for this area of the school's work is changing; in addition, the school is joining a national 'raising achievement' initiative, which will provide effective systems for checking progress regularly and accurately. In some cases, targets students negotiate with individual teachers are more challenging than those set by the school, showing that those of the latter lack aspiration. Changes in place for September will tackle this, but current targets are not challenging enough, not well understood by students, and not influencing learning in a consistent or positive way. The headteacher is cautious about whether some predictions for 2013 are fully reliable until final results are known.
- Subject leaders are more accountable for the performance of their areas than in the past. Better systems are now in place to check how well each subject is

doing. Heads of department are questioning teaching methods if they do not lead to good results. There is a clear focus on previously underachieving groups, such as boys and students eligible for free school meals. Some senior or subject leaders are trying innovative approaches to help students overcome barriers to learning, such as boys undertaking a climbing wall challenge with the help of a parent. However, the impact of better subject leadership has not yet been seen in consistent gains in achievement and the headteacher acknowledges the risk to continuity of progress presented by changes in staffing.

- The school's innovative approach to teaching some GCSE subjects in mixed-age groups has not yet been tested with a full set of results. Given changes in staffing and remaining inconsistencies in teaching, this approach requires urgent review to make sure that it is securing the best possible outcomes for all students entered on 'immersion' courses, including the youngest.
- A policy is now in place to improve students' basic literacy skills, but it has not yet had a strong or lasting impact on the quality of reading, writing and speaking across subjects.
- Not all senior leaders are equally sharp and accurate in their evaluation of teaching or in their understanding of how best to drive improvement.

I will continue to support and challenge the school until its next section 5 inspection. In the meantime, the school should take further action to:

- support new subject and year leaders, through highly effective induction, so that they make an immediate and strong contribution to improving learning and achievement
- make sure that new systems for setting achievement targets and tracking students' progress are securely in place for the start of the new academic year, that students and parents understand them, and that they positively influence learning and progress
- review the quality of teaching in English as a matter of urgency to satisfy school leaders and governors that achievement is improving for all groups of students in all lessons
- ensure that all school leaders fully understand their responsibility for raising achievement quickly and are fully and equally effective in doing so.

External support

The headteacher actively seeks expertise and good practice in other schools to support leaders in driving change at a faster pace and in recognising excellence. She makes good use of the school improvement officer's evaluations of progress to maintain a strong focus on areas of weakness. These reports concur with the inspection findings in that they recognise the value of strategies introduced by the headteacher but recommend immediate, rigorous evaluation of these in light of

achievement in 2013. The school improvement officer has also helped maintain a strong focus on the achievement of students eligible for free school meals, by reporting specifically and in detail on strategies to accelerate their progress. However, such initiatives have been hindered by significant delay in the local authority sending the school the relevant information about this group.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside

Her Majesty's Inspector