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Rachel Cave
Headteacher
Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre
Surley Row
Emmer Green
Reading
RG4 8LR

Dear Ms Cave

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre

Following my visit to your school on 3 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you and your deputy headteachers, middle leaders and members of the governing body. The school improvement plan was evaluated and a number of other documents were considered. I also made brief visits to a number of lessons.

Main findings

At the time of the inspection you had been in post for approximately three weeks. The report comments favourably on the changes that were then underway. This positive trend has continued and much has been achieved in the past two months.

The school's focus is now more sharply on improving teaching and learning. Some very useful work is being done to make general improvements in teaching across the school. For example, teachers have been organised into groups and given time to produce teaching ideas and materials for others to use; this has yielded some worthwhile results. Useful work is also being done to support and challenge individual teachers to help them to improve. A number of the school's better teachers have been appointed as coaches; they are currently being trained before being deployed to work with other teachers to help them to improve.

Leaders visit lessons regularly to monitor the quality of teaching. Some observations involve a series of brief visits to lessons. These are used mainly to identify and celebrate good practice. This is a useful short-term strategy. Longer observations are often undertaken by senior and middle leaders observing together. This is a useful way of checking and moderating middle leaders' judgments to ensure that they are accurate and reliable. Lesson observations are tracked and analysed carefully, although leaders recognise that judgements have, historically, been overgenerous at times. This information is therefore rightly being checked carefully against more recent observations to ensure that leaders have a full, accurate and reliable picture of how good teaching is now.

The school's plan is a useful document. It focuses on the most important areas for the school and provides a valuable summary of the main actions and activities that need to be carried out. It does, however, have weaknesses. For example, it is not precise enough about when some activities will be carried out. Most importantly, it is not clear about the improvements in teaching and achievement that are expected to result from the activities in the plan, and how much improvement is anticipated by different points next year.

Governors have a realistic understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They provide challenge, although their role in monitoring the school's progress against the action plan is not yet fully established. Governors are working with leaders to ensure that the information that they receive from the school includes an appropriate level of detail. The review of the governing body suggested in the section 5 inspection reports has not yet been carried out, although there has been an initial exploration of the options available.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- improve the school's action plan to ensure that:
 - all actions and activities have clear deadlines
 - there is greater clarity about the intended impact of activities, particularly their impact on teaching and achievement

- it is clear about how much will be achieved by different points next term
- identify the way in which the governing body will monitor the school's progress against the action plan
- complete the review of the governing body suggested in the section 5 report.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

At the moment the school is receiving and benefiting from an appropriate range of external support.

Highdown is a converter academy. It has cordial relationships with the local authority, although has received no support from them. The school has benefited from support which it has commissioned itself. Some of this has been provided by private consultants and organisations, although the headteacher has also drawn on contacts in her previous school and local authority. For example, staff have made visits to schools in Hounslow and some of their local authority officers have visited Highdown to offer support and guidance. The school is also developing links with other local schools, although some of these are at an early stage.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the local authority for Reading, the Education Funding Agency and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector