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Shena Moynihan
Headteacher
Highcrest Academy
Hatters Lane
High Wycombe
HP13 7NQ

Dear Miss Moynihan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Highcrest Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 17 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. 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 in November 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- re-consider its self-evaluation, particularly focusing on the learning and achievement of different groups of students, so that leaders base their improvement activities on a more searching and accurate analysis of the academy's performance.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the senior Vice Principal, other senior leaders, students, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy improvement plans and read other documents

relating to the academy's improvement, such as minutes of governing body meetings. I briefly visited a selection of lessons and a sixth form study session.

Main findings

The recent inspection judgement, that the academy 'requires improvement' to be good, has come as a blow to you and your senior team. The collective pride in the academy, amongst staff and students, is palpable. One senior student wanted to tell me that there had been 'a misunderstanding' about the academy and this was typical of the group I met, who are hugely loyal to their teachers and wear their uniform with great pride.

Governors and the senior team have, however, accepted that aspects of the academy's work are not good enough. There is a collective determination to get to good as quickly as possible and, beyond that, to regain your previous judgement of 'outstanding'. Governors have got on quickly with a review of their work, led by a National Leader of Governance. The Chair of the Governing Body is making tighter checks on the actions governors take to monitor the academy's improvement. Governors are building an independent analysis of how well things are going, so that they recognise emerging weaknesses and can challenge you and your team more forcefully. The Chair of the Governing Body wants to be visible and available to parents and students and is using his time well to achieve this. Minutes of governing body meetings, however, provide very limited evidence of how governors hold school leaders to account, by questioning and challenging them about student achievement and the quality of teaching. For example, curriculum committee minutes for the beginning of the academic year give every impression that governors received a report of a significant dip in results without much comment.

You have refined academy action plans since the inspection, resulting in a shorter, sharper, 'Raising Achievement Plan'. This shows clearly the actions you are taking to secure rapid improvement. You have tackled under-achievement in the sixth form by taking a fresh look at the courses students are taking and making changes where they are unsuitable. You have also challenged students hard where they are not working hard enough to achieve well; most have responded well to this and are working harder to achieve their targets. This has not been popular with some students or their parents, but it has been necessary to ensure courses are better matched to need. You accept that the academy has to take responsibility for students not always bridging the gap between GCSE and A level study successfully. You and your team are working hard to provide better advice to students embarking on sixth form courses. As a result of your actions, far more students have stuck with their courses so far this year than last. The head of sixth form is monitoring their progress towards targets more tightly; the latest achievement information shows significant improvement on the previous year. One girl was effusive about being

given the opportunity to change courses; her grades have shifted from scraped passes to As.

A further consequence of your analysis of sixth form achievement is the implementation of literacy and study skills support, timetabled on a rolling programme so that everyone who needs it benefits. This is helping to ensure that students whose command of basic literacy was insecure on entry to the sixth form are able to improve their skills, with an appropriate focus on the reading and writing demands of examination papers.

Some aspects of your work are not sufficiently keenly focused on the right priorities:

- There is a comprehensive system for observing lessons, which links to teacher training programmes. However, the link between this system and the academy's analysis of achievement is not strong enough or clear enough. For example, boys' achievement in English is a key priority arising from last summer's GCSE results, but it is not obvious where this is picked up in the analysis of teaching or related training.
- The achievement of students eligible for free school meals is carefully tracked and monitored, but leadership of this area covers Years 7–11 only and does not follow the students into the sixth form, to ensure that they do not fall behind.
- The academy's self-evaluation document continues to judge areas of its work as 'good' or 'outstanding' despite evidence to the contrary. This document correctly highlights the achievement of boys, some students with special educational needs and AS level students, as areas for improvement. It persists, despite these significant weaknesses, in judging aspects of learning as 'good'.

The lack of clarity in some aspects of your improvement activities remains because some resistance to the inspection judgement remains. You will not succeed in making the necessary improvements if this clouds your judgement. By the end of my visit, you accepted this and decided, wisely, to re-visit the academy's self-evaluation with a sharper eye.

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

External support

Although the academy functions independently of the local authority, it has maintained constructive relationships with the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust. The link officer from the Trust has a good understanding of the academy's strengths and

weaknesses and is able to provide helpful evaluation and support when requested to do so.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Education Funding Agency, the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside

Her Majesty's Inspector