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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 academy on 30 April 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy 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.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, I visited a number of lessons, observed behaviour at break and lunchtime, held discussions with three groups of students and talked informally to other students around the academy. I also held meetings with you and other leaders to discuss the action taken since the last inspection.

Main findings

An effective system is in place to track students' achievement. Leaders make good use of the information that this provides to monitor the achievement of different

groups of students and to check the performance of different subject areas. Leaders are working intensively with subject departments to ensure that their assessments of students' current achievement are accurate and reliable. These assessments indicate that achievement is rising. Year 11 students that have taken examinations already have achieved well.

The academy's leaders have a thorough understanding of how good teaching is now and a detailed understanding of each teacher's strengths and weaknesses. They use this information well to provide teachers with appropriate training and support. This is clearly leading to improvements in teachers' practice: there is an increasing amount of good teaching across the academy. Most teachers now mark work regularly, using the academy's new policy for providing feedback. However, the students that I spoke to pointed to the significant variability in the quality of teaching, particularly where they are taught by temporary or supply teachers.

A good system is in place to review the work of each subject department. Reviews are carried out by a team of senior and middle leaders, working alongside an external consultant with expertise in the particular subject area. These reviews are rigorous and thorough. They identify detailed and specific areas for improvement which provide very helpful guidance for further development.

Students generally behave very well in lessons and around the site. They are polite and friendly to visitors. They move promptly to their lessons at the end of break and lunchtime. This helps to ensure that lessons start promptly, despite the academy's large site. Students told me that bullying is rare; they praised the rigour and sensitivity with which staff deal with any incidents that do occur.

Some students, though, told me that behaviour in crowded corridors and on the stairs can be noisy and boisterous, and that a small number of students use rude, disrespectful language towards others; this was a concern for them. Rules are in place to ensure that students move in only one direction on crowded stairwells, but not all staff enforce them.

Since the last visit there has been an external review of the work of the governing body. This was thorough. Governors are making full use of the review's findings to further sharpen their work. They are receiving valuable training, for example in how to interpret and use information about students' achievement.

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

You are making good use of external support to assist the academy's development, drawing extensively on your contacts in the local area and further afield. Importantly, you ensure that the people that you are using have the necessary skills, expertise and credibility to undertake their work to an appropriately high standard.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector