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David Miller
The Gainsborough Academy
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Dear Mr Miller

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Gainsborough Academy

Following my visit to your school on 28 January 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 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 October 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the sponsor are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- raise expectations and aspirations of what students can achieve, and ensure that teachers refuse to accept work that is clearly below students' abilities
- increase the level of challenge students face through more demanding tasks and thought-provoking questioning
- ensure the written feedback teachers give to students is consistent and effective
- ensure progress data is accurate across all departments
- formulate a coherent and focused strategy for improvement which involves the sponsor and the local governing body.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders and the head of the English department to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I had telephone conversations with a representative of the academy sponsor and the vice-chair of the local governing body. I evaluated the school improvement plan. You took me on a tour of the school and we visited several classrooms to see the learning that was taking place.

Context

There have been significant and very recent staff changes. The member of staff who was Principal at the time of the previous inspection left the academy earlier this month. At the time of my visit, the interim Principal was in the second week of his role. A new head of the English department began at the start of this term. One teacher of mathematics left the academy since the recent inspection and has been replaced with a teacher new to the school. There have been changes of role for some established members of staff and more changes are planned. Further, there were other significant changes to staffing in September, just prior to the previous inspection. These included the appointment of a vice-principal. The sponsor, The Lincoln College Group, is relatively new to the academy having taken it over from a previous sponsor in the summer term of 2014.

Main findings

A huge amount of industry has been shown by members of staff and many initiatives designed to improve the school are underway. It is the effectiveness of the most significant of these actions that cannot yet be confirmed. Most are very recent and there is not enough evidence of their impact. This situation has partly been exacerbated by very recent changes in staff. Two key appointments – yours and the head of the English department – are a matter of days into your roles.

In some subject areas there is a legacy of low aspirations, underachievement and poor leadership which is only beginning to be addressed. Students' books indicate that many teachers regularly accept work that is clearly well below what students can achieve.

You, supported by the Principal of a local academy, have correctly identified that the current school development plan is not fit for purpose. It lacks focus. It does not name the individuals who will evaluate actions or state the dates when progress against the actions is assessed. This should be addressed as a priority.

You are overseeing the revision of departmental schemes of work in order to address many of the areas for development identified by your recent inspection. These include raising the level of challenge for students and increasing the pace of learning. These revisions are currently ongoing.

The vice-principal with responsibility for achievement has revised the academy's systems for tracking students' progress. Achievement data entered by teachers is now considered and approved by faculty leaders before being assessed and agreed by the vice-principal. This is helping to improve the accuracy of progress data so that underachievement can be more readily identified. However, you need to ensure that the process for quality assuring the data is robust and consistent across subjects, particularly for Key Stage 3 students. The science department is doing this well. The vice-principal with responsibility for curriculum leader has had a positive impact on increasing in the proportion of students currently working towards achieving the EBacc.

Senior leaders recently revised the academy's marking policy. There are good examples of marking in the academy but the approaches are not consistent. For example, there are significant differences in the effectiveness of teachers' requests for students to address any issues raised through the marking process.

The new head of the English department is taking appropriate steps to drive improvements. Supported by the vice-principal responsible for achievement, she has identified areas for improvement in the department and is beginning to address them successfully. A lead practitioner is mentoring targeted students and is currently planning a whole-school approach to improving literacy standards. Another teacher of English is working closely with groups of students whose literacy skills are underdeveloped. Underachieving Key Stage 3 pupils receive six hours of English teaching a week with a view to improving their achievement in this subject. Older students who are able readers have been paired up with younger students who have difficulties in this area. Literacy and numeracy activities have been integrated into tutor times on a weekly basis. It is too early to judge the collective impact of these strategies.

External validation of mock examinations for Year 11 students in English, mathematics and science has taken place. The results of this, as well as issues identified during lessons, has led to tailored support for identified students. While this has not yet had an impact on progress in English, it has contributed to improvements in mathematics.

Staff training on effective questioning was planned for the evening of my visit, in line with one of the academy's areas for improvement. The academy has a well-established programme of professional development. This includes weekly, two-hour training sessions as well as other opportunities. Twenty-seven members of staff have qualified to teach a reading recovery programme. All teachers have completed the first level of the 'Teacher Enhancement and Enrichment Programme'. Senior leaders need to evaluate the impact of this activity.

Senior leaders have introduced a revised behaviour policy which focuses on rewarding good behaviour as well as addressing the opposite. The proportion of

rewards in relation to negative sanctions has trebled. The number of escalated behaviour incidents has reduced. Nevertheless, there is much work to be done before behaviour is at the academy is good. This must include the consistent application of the new behaviour policy by all staff. The academy's new strategy of working closely to improve the behaviour of students at risk of exclusion is showing early, positive impact.

Attendance has begun to improve due to the individual attention shown to those students who do not come to school regularly. Senior leaders have clear strategies to improve attendance and are prepared to take legal action over attendance issues as a last resort if absolutely necessary.

As with many other aspects of the academy, the local governing body has been subject to recent and significant changes. Governance has been strengthened since the academy's recent inspection through the addition of five governors, including the vice-chair. One governor has left. The chair of the local governing body and two other governors were appointed shortly before your recent inspection. Further additions are planned. The formation of sub-committees to make the local governing body more effective is planned for next month. Governors held the previous Principal to account for students' achievement and asked for further information when they were not fully satisfied with the information presented. As you are only in the second week of your role, governors have not yet had a collective opportunity to hold you to account for your work.

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

Three key appointments have been made by the sponsor to try and ensure stability recently – an interim Principal and the chair and vice-chair of the local governing body. The sponsor is well aware of the challenges facing the academy and is working towards establishing an effective strategic direction for the school. This requires further development, including the close involvement of the local governing body. The sponsor has arranged support for the interim Principal from the leader of another academy. In order to allow the interim Principal and other senior leaders more time to focus on improvement work, the sponsor is also supporting with services such as facilities, IT and human resources.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Lincolnshire and the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Ian McNeilly
Her Majesty's Inspector