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Ms N Mattin
Principal
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Dear Ms Mattin

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Spires Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 6 November 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 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 May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in May 2015, the academy was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and trustees are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good academy.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and the executive principal, other senior leaders, subject leaders and trustees to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. We briefly visited a number of lessons around the academy to see teaching and learning. I evaluated a range of documents, including the academy's improvement plans.

Context

Since the last inspection a senior leader with prior experience of managing students' behaviour and attendance has joined the academy. Five teachers left the academy and six joined, including a new science subject leader.

Main findings

Since the inspection you have rightly concentrated on improving the quality of teaching and learning. You have implemented a new approach to teaching called 'matching ability to activity', building on the success of a similar approach which has raised standards in French. When planning lessons, teachers carefully check what students can already do and then devise learning tasks to improve particular skills. Since the work is closely matched to their starting points, students approach the tasks with more confidence and enthusiasm. Subject leaders are monitoring regularly to check that teachers are using detailed information about students' prior attainment to assign them to suitable working groups. During my visits to classrooms the atmosphere was purposeful and students were appropriately involved in a range of activities. It was clear that the students knew what was expected of them during the lessons. No low-level disruption was observed.

Where weaknesses in teaching are identified, leaders devise individual training plans and offer support, alongside an expectation that improvement is required. Well-targeted coaching takes place and you are now checking carefully that it has been effective. Most teachers are developing their skills and teaching in the academy is improving. In a few cases, when this is not the case, teachers leave the academy. Your relentless determination to retain and recruit teachers of the highest quality has led to significant staff turnover during the last three years. However, since the start of this academic year staffing is more stable. Two mathematics teachers are due to join the academy in January.

Your well-regarded teacher training partnership with Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School (SLGGS) offers placements for student teachers and this has helped recruit well-qualified teachers. Trainee teachers are able to gain useful experience through teaching in both schools and this year two subject specialists have joined Spire Academy following successful teaching practice at the academy. A few qualified teachers from the academy have also benefited from placements at SLGGS.

You show resilience and a determined drive for further improvement. Senior and middle leaders I met were well motivated, demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and recognised that further improvements in students' achievement are necessary. In particular, the need to raise GCSE results is an immediate priority. Leaders anticipated a drop in results this year, but the grades were much lower than expected. You responded by conducting a thorough analysis of standards in each subject to identify why results were lower than predicted. Based on these findings, you have planned a series of actions to address the weaknesses. In a number of subjects, students' coursework grades were adjusted

downwards by examiners and to tackle this you have a comprehensive programme of training to improve the accuracy of teachers' assessment of students' work. For a number of subjects, including English, geography and art, teachers are working with colleagues at SLGGS to moderate work at the highest GCSE grades. For other subjects, links have been made with schools with different expertise to offer. There is already some evidence that teachers are marking work more accurately.

You have sensibly adopted a cautious approach to tracking the progress of students in all year groups until you are confident that grades given by teachers are reliable. Nevertheless, your latest progress data show that the current Year 11 are on course to make better progress than last year's cohort. When you have gathered and analysed secure performance information which shows how well students are learning, you will be better placed to evaluate the impact of your 'matching activity to ability' approach to teaching. School leaders are still not taking full account of trends in students' achievements to judge the effectiveness of teaching. As a result, and because they are keen to acknowledge the developing practice of teachers, they are currently overgenerous in their evaluation of the quality of teaching in the academy.

Since the inspection you have acted decisively to improve behaviour and attendance. Your new senior leader with responsibility for behaviour and attendance led a relaunch of the school's behaviour for learning policy, which led to systems being used more consistently and effectively. This has helped to create a productive working environment, strengthened by positive relationships between staff and students. As a result, the numbers of incidents of poor behaviour during lessons and numbers of students issued with fixed-term exclusions have both declined significantly. In partnership with your attendance officer, you strengthened communication with parents and introduced a number of incentives for students to attend more regularly. Attendance is now rising rapidly.

In response to the inspection in May and this summer's low GCSE results you have written a range of improvement plans. The plans outline many appropriate actions but do not explain clearly enough how these actions are expected to raise students' achievements. Arrangements for monitoring actions and evaluating their impact are not precise enough. Steps are not measurable with clear milestones along the way. The plan would be more robust if the staff responsible for leading activities were not the same people monitoring their implementation and evaluating the impact.

Through their regular visits to the academy, trustees know the strengths and weaknesses of the academy well. The chair of trustees has a clear vision for the academy and new trustees bring helpful skills and experience. They are beginning to ask academy leaders more challenging questions. The addition of clearer and more measurable targets to the improvement plan would make it easier for trustees to judge how successfully leaders are improving teaching and raising standards. In addition, the governance of the academy needs to be reviewed so that it is clearer how members of the Trust are holding governing trustees to account.

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

External support

The academy forms part of a collaborative partnership with Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School, whose Principal is also the executive principal of the academy. This partnership is contributing well to improvements at the academy by providing training for trainee teachers and established staff. In addition, the executive principal offers strong challenge and support to the academy principal, through an informal relationship. Trustees are rightly taking steps to clarify responsibilities and accountabilities of these two roles.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Director of Children's Services for Kent and School.NOTIFICATIONS@education.gsi.gov.uk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector