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Mr Rob Hatch
Principal
The Holly Hall Academy
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Dear Mr Hatch

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Holly Hall Academy

Following my visit to your school on 22 April 2016, 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 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 school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- strengthen leaders' monitoring of teaching in the school, including identifying strengths and weakness, so that training is targeted on those areas and individuals where it will have the most impact
- ensure that governors are less reliant on the principal and have the expertise to scrutinise and evaluate the impact of improvement plans, and so effectively challenge leaders.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the principal, other senior and middle leaders, a group of Year 11 pupils, the chair of the governing body and three other governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke over the telephone to two representatives of the local authority. I evaluated the school's development plan and other school documents, including self-evaluation and minutes of governors' meetings. I joined a member of the senior leadership team on brief visits to several classes, where I spoke with pupils and looked at their work.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, the principal joined the school in September 2015. He joined a school facing significant financial challenges and legacy issues of staffing and leadership structures. A restructuring of senior and middle leadership and staffing is currently taking place and will be complete by September 2016. Eight members of staff have left the school and three have been replaced. More members of staff are due to leave at the end of this year. Five governors have been appointed and two have left the governing body. New governors bring additional educational and financial expertise to the governing body.

Main findings

The rate of improvement since the inspection of May 2015, especially in the quality of teaching, has been too slow because leaders and governors have been focusing their energies on addressing the school's financial and staffing issues.

Developing and implementing systems to measure the quality of day-to-day teaching have been too slow. As a result, leaders do not have an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses in teaching across the school, and they have therefore not been able to target training on those areas and individuals where it is most needed.

The pace of improvement has accelerated since the arrival of the principal in September 2015 and there have been some recent improvements in teaching. Pupils now receive better feedback on their work and the very recent focus on learning collaboratively has been well received by pupils and teachers. Teaching in science, identified as a weakness in the previous inspection, is improving because of good subject leadership, supported strongly by a senior leader and a local authority adviser.

The principal, supported by an increasingly effective senior leadership team, has brought a clear vision and a determination to improve Holly Hall. Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have drawn up detailed and comprehensive improvement plans that tackle head on its weaknesses. However, it is too early for many of the actions contained in the plans to have yielded improvement.

Leaders have introduced several new systems this year, for example to check on the quality of teaching, measure pupils' progress and monitor pupils' behaviour. Some of these are beginning to bring about improvement, while for others it is too early to judge their impact.

Pupils' behaviour is improving because leaders are now collecting information from teachers, carefully analysing it and taking action in response to issues that arise. Clear new systems to address poor behaviour have led to fewer fixed-term exclusions, fewer 'internal isolations' and less disruption to lessons. However, leaders are aware that more work is needed to eradicate disruption of lessons caused by the poor behaviour of a minority of pupils. Attendance is now close to the national average, although leaders know that further improving the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is a priority.

Leaders now have assessment information about pupils' attainment and progress at their fingertips for the first time. This information indicates that outcomes in 2016 will be better than in 2015. However, the fact that this predictive information has not been available in previous years means that leaders cannot be confident about its reliability. Assessment information is currently too focused on attainment measures, such as the percentage of pupils achieving GCSE at A* to C grades in a subject, rather than focusing on the more important measures of how much progress individuals and groups of pupils are making.

The appointment of new governors with educational and financial expertise has strengthened the governing body and it is beginning to take on a more strategic role. For example, governors were fully involved in helping to develop the priorities that form the school's development plan. However, governors still rely heavily on the principal to provide them with information about most aspects of the school's performance. Although their ability to question and challenge leaders is improving, they do not currently have the expertise to scrutinise and independently check the information they are given.

External support

Since the arrival of the principal, the school has made effective use of external support from the local authority. The local authority lead educational adviser has supported the development of middle leaders and provides ongoing support for the principal and governors. Local authority support for the science department is one of the reasons why there is better teaching in that subject. Leaders have sourced

additional support from local schools to assist with assessment systems and provision for pupils who have special educational needs. Some improvement has been seen as a result, although it is too early to judge its full impact.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Dudley. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector