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17 May 2016

Ms Fiona Pierson
Principal
Colchester Academy
Hawthorn Avenue
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Dear Ms Pierson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Colchester Academy

Following my visit to your school on 5 May 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 December 2015. 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- be more explicit in the school improvement plan about how leaders intend to improve outcomes for pupils who have special educational needs or disability.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, the chair of the governing body and two groups of pupils from key stages 3 and 4. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the multi-academy trust. I visited a number of lessons accompanied by the assistant principal (quality assurance) to observe pupils' learning. I attended a Year 9 assembly. The school improvement plan was evaluated. I also scrutinised a range of documents including the school's record of recruitment checks of staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have appointed an additional assistant principal who is responsible for key stage 4 standards. You have also appointed a member of staff to be second in charge of the English faculty as well as a literacy co-ordinator.

Main findings

Your school improvement plan is suitably ambitious and addresses the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. It is clear who is responsible for leading the improvement initiatives and what you aim to have achieved by the end of this academic year. You have evaluated the progress already made against the proposed actions, and a large proportion of these have already been achieved.

My scrutiny of your information on pupils' achievement in English, as well as my scrutiny of pupils' work, indicates that all groups of pupils are making better progress than previously. The proportion of girls making expected progress in English has increased significantly compared to what they achieved in 2015. This has been matched by teachers raising their expectations of what pupils can achieve and because teachers match the work better to individual pupils' needs.

Your work with the most-able pupils has also been successful. This has been achieved through a range of strategies. For example, you have restructured your tutor groups in Year 11 so that one of these focuses on the most-able pupils. Work with these pupils involves the use of university graduates and visits to Cambridge University so that these pupils have the highest aspirations for their future. Your own monitoring systems forecast an increase in the proportion of pupils who will achieve A* and A grades for 2016.

As the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in your school is well above the national average, you have rightly decided to target these pupils by improving the quality of teaching they experience, rather than remove them from lessons for additional support. You have recently introduced a system for recording teachers' lessons which teachers can view later to allow them to identify successful teaching strategies and areas where they might improve. Pupil premium funding has also been used to provide well-targeted staff training as well as additional teaching assistants who support pupils in the classroom.

Pupils who have special educational needs or disability are also making better progress than previously. However, your improvement plan does not provide sufficient detail about the actions you have taken or plan to take to achieve this. You have improved your systems for ensuring that children who are looked after by the local authority make better progress by enabling all relevant staff to have access to information on their learning and progress.

You have focused on improving systems for managing teachers' performance. For example, all teachers now assess their performance against the teachers' standards,

and lesson observations generate a minimum of two targets which are followed up through subsequent visits to lessons by senior or middle leaders. As a result, the quality of teaching has improved and more of it is now good.

You have actively addressed the weaknesses identified in the assessment of pupils' work. Every book I scrutinised contains a feedback form which is completed after regular assessments. This form has improved pupils' performance because it identifies what they have done well and how they can do better. Pupils told me that they appreciated the opportunity to respond to their teachers' marking at the start of the lesson.

You have introduced three different pathways for pupils to follow in each lesson which are matched to their ability. Pupils have a good understanding of these and often aspire to move onto the more challenging pathway. They also know what they must do in order to achieve this because you make available detailed criteria which they have to meet.

The trust has provided support by means of a coach and mentor who works on a weekly basis with senior leaders. This work has now been extended to include the school's middle leaders. Other members of the trust carry out reviews of the school's progress regularly. These reviews support your view that the school has made a number of gains since the previous inspection.

The governing body consists of a skilled group of individuals. Their skills are used well to support and challenge the school's leaders. Members visit the school to conduct visits to lessons with a specific focus. Hence the governing body has a good understanding of the school's strengths and the challenges it continues to face.

External support

The local authority has supported the English team leader and her department in improving the quality of teaching and in writing an action plan for the subject area. An external consultant has visited the school to validate the achievements made thus far in their improvement plan. The school is making good use of this support to improve its provision for pupils and their outcomes.

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

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

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector