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4 July 2013

Mr Matthew Munro
The Headteacher
Meopham School
Wrotham Road
Meopham
Gravesend
DA13 0AH

Dear Mr Munro

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Meopham School

Following my visit with Matthew Haynes, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 3 and 4 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was a monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the executive headteacher, groups of pupils, members of the governing body, senior teachers and subject leaders.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all pupils.

Context

Meopham School became an academy on 1 February 2013, as part of the Swale Academies Trust. The school had been working with Westlands School, an outstanding school and the lead school in the trust, prior to conversion. The headteacher of Westlands is now also the executive headteacher of Meopham.

There has been significant staff turnover since preparation for conversion started, with a number of new staff, both at senior level and teachers new to the profession. Further changes since January have included a new director of English and a new teacher of science, both members of the academy leadership team. The academy is fully staffed for September.

The academy is a small, rural, non-selective school, in an area where most schools select by ability at age 11. There are 602 students on roll, including 52 in the sixth form. The majority of students are White British; about 10% belong to minority ethnic groups and a few speak English as an additional language. The proportion eligible for free school meals and supported by pupil premium funding is similar to the national average. A higher proportion than usual has special educational needs and receives help within school; almost double the usual proportion receive further help or have a statement of special educational needs. The academy houses the Nick Hornby Centre, a local authority funded specialist resourced provision for students with autism. In September 2013, the management of this resource will transfer to the academy.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Achievement was good in the vast majority of lessons seen during the inspection and outstanding in some, largely because teachers' expectations of what students can achieve are much higher than in the past. Students now talk about their targets with confidence and aspiration. The headteacher's highly influential mantra is, 'Are we talking standards? If not, why not?'

The principal focus in the academy's drive for improvement has been to raise standards in English and mathematics, both subjects which had been seriously underperforming in the predecessor school. Predicted results for 2013 indicate that the proportion of students making steady progress, or better, in English and mathematics, will meet or exceed national expectations. These predictions are strongly supported by good results already gained from examinations taken early in mathematics. Estimates for Year 11 students eligible for free school meals show that they are making good progress in line with their peers. However, the academy's records of how well this group is doing across all year groups show some fluctuation. The achievement of students who are disabled or have special educational needs is also improving. More of these students are making good progress now than in the past. The Nick Hornby Centre provides good support for students with autistic spectrum conditions, some of whom achieve exceptionally well as a result.

Students are doing better across a range of subjects, so that a significant overall rise in the proportion gaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or better in 2013 is likely. There are still some areas of underperformance, however, such as in history, geography and design and technology. Senior and middle leaders are aware of this;

there is no complacency. All subject leaders are held strongly to account for gains in achievement in their areas.

Sixth form students are generally making adequate progress, but there are exceptions, with some A- and AS-level courses proving more successful than others. Sixth form leaders act quickly to adapt courses to better suit students' abilities and needs. They are clear about the need to secure more evenly good achievement across all subjects and courses.

The quality of teaching

Students report that teaching is better planned and organised than in the past. They feel motivated by the common 'all, most, some' structure to lessons, designed to set clear expectations of what everyone can achieve. In an English lesson, the teacher used this to motivate and drive up expectations. Students were singled out for encouragement to push themselves, based on evidence in their books of emerging A-grade work. They rose to the challenge, producing sophisticated written accounts of the context influencing Shakespeare when he wrote *Macbeth*.

Occasionally, teachers miss opportunities to challenge students through questions that require them to think for themselves, develop their answers, or speculate about the possible outcomes of an investigation. Where lessons require improvement, it is sometimes because teachers ask questions that invite only two possible answers, or fill in the answer themselves rather than prompt students to think more deeply. In a few instances, too many students work at the level for 'all' rather than pushing on to more demanding work. However, in the best lessons, questioning and target setting are used exceptionally well. For example, in a business studies lesson, Year 10 students challenged one another's thinking and were highly motivated. This teacher also used targets as a launch pad for higher achievement, rather than an end in themselves.

Teachers mark books regularly. They consistently apply the academy policy of guiding students towards 'what went well' and giving advice as to how their work could become 'even better'. The best examples of this are where students write back to the teacher with their own thoughts about how to improve their work, but this is not yet a routine feature. Simple, but effective, systems help students keep track of their progress, for example labels on book covers travel with the student from book to book, showing progress against targets. As a result, students can look back at how far their learning has developed and talk with precision about what to do to get to the next stage.

A range of strategies is now in place to develop students' basic literacy skills and to encourage wider reading, although these have not yet had time to bring about notable improvements across all subjects. The best teachers routinely plan lessons that develop literacy skills, but this is not consistent. Plans to widen this practice are

in place, but need close monitoring to ensure that they have a rapid and positive influence on students' ability to read, write and speak confidently and well.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students are friendly, polite and welcoming. They feel secure and enjoy coming to school. They explained to inspectors that any poor behaviour has immediate consequences, rising in line with the seriousness of the infringement. They point to considerable improvements in behaviour since the academy opened, because of clear direction from the headteacher and because teachers apply behaviour consequences consistently.

In lessons, behaviour is usually good. In a significant proportion of lessons visited during this inspection, it was outstanding. This was the case where teachers created lessons in which students took an active part in directing their own learning and helping one another. Good relationships throughout the academy make this possible. Students do not see bullying as an issue. They express great confidence in their teachers to deal with bullying or disrespectful behaviour of any kind if it does arise. One girl said she would recommend the academy to a new student on the grounds that 'if you have experienced bullying somewhere else, it won't happen here'. Students report zero tolerance of discriminatory behaviour and academy records show that any instance of this is taken very seriously. The rate of exclusion is currently higher than academy leaders would like, reflecting their high expectations of good behaviour. Internal systems for supporting students to change their attitudes and get back to learning, such as the Green Room, are beginning to reduce the need for exclusion from school.

Attendance has risen since the academy opened and is tracked carefully to make sure it continues to rise above national averages. This has meant taking a firm line with families taking children out of school during term time. This year's early timetable change, to get on with new courses of study at the end of summer term, is a good example of how determined academy leaders are to make every day in school count.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy is extremely well led by the headteacher and executive headteacher. They communicate a vision for Meopham as a highly successful, small school community in which students thrive academically, with an excellent grounding in reading, writing, mathematics and communication. They evaluate the academy's work with a keen eye; improvement planning is well focused on the right priorities. They are not complacent; they know where improvement is needed. Nonetheless, they have achieved a great deal in the few months since the academy opened.

The governing body is rejuvenated since the school's change of status. It retains the local knowledge, experience and commitment of long-standing governors, now

balanced with the invaluable expertise of new trust governors, such as in employment law and financial management. Governors challenge academy leaders strongly. They correctly evaluate that they need a sharper understanding of how performance data are interpreted to monitor how different groups of students are doing. They have planned training which will equip them well to interpret the academy's first set of published results. They know where teaching is strongest and support the headteacher in challenging poor performance or rewarding the best. They manage the budget prudently and actively seek improvements to the school site, without allowing this to become a distraction from the core business of teaching and learning.

The achievement of students eligible for free school meals is a key priority. Pupil premium funding currently pays for a range of intervention and support programmes aimed at closing the achievement gap between those targeted for this funding and other students. Governors rightly plan to scrutinise the initial impact of this work on the academy's first set of examination results.

The headteacher and executive headteacher set high standards for the senior team. They expect the members to be excellent teachers of English, mathematics or science, and to contribute to increasingly strong achievement across the academy. Most senior leaders make sharp and accurate evaluations of teaching and learning. The monitoring of teaching is thorough and rigorous. Lesson observations are extensively used to check on the quality of teachers' work. The senior team and subject leaders hold teachers strongly to account for how well students in their classes achieve.

External support

The academy benefits greatly from being part of the Swale Academies Trust. Senior leaders learn from the experience of others who have been successful in leading good or outstanding schools and work across the trust to develop systems and courses that will maximise students' achievement. The trust has enabled the governing body to expand its expertise and experience and to demand more rapid improvement.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards of achievement in all subjects and for all groups of students at the same pace as in English and mathematics.
- Build on improvements in teaching by ensuring that all teachers:
 - consistently ask students questions that challenge them to think, to express their ideas fully and to develop their own ideas and conclusions
 - are equally skilled in making learning expectations clear, so that all students aspire to the highest level of achievement.

- Develop better systems for checking on the progress of sixth form students and for evaluating their overall achievement, so that achievement in the sixth form improves rapidly and is equally strong in all subjects and courses.
- Review and evaluate the impact of the whole-academy literacy policy to make sure that it is having a clear and positive impact on students' reading habits and their development of basic literacy skills.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body, the local authority of Kent, the Education Funding Agency and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector