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Karen Cross
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Dear Ms Cross

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Community College Whitstable

Following my visit to your school on 29 January 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 second 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.

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.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with the consultant headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and the local authority school improvement advisor. I also spoke over the telephone with the local authority's senior secondary adviser. You accompanied me on a lengthy visit to 12 lessons where we were able to speak to pupils, look at their work and observe their behaviour. Actions taken since the last inspection were discussed and evaluated. The updated school improvement plans were scrutinised.

Context

The substantive headteacher has been absent from 2 November 2015 onwards. Since that time, the deputy headteacher has taken over as acting headteacher. A

consultant headteacher, a local leader of education, is leading the school's improvement strategy and is on site for three days a week.

Main findings

Since the first monitoring inspection which took place on 22 June 2015, the school's GCSE results have been published. Senior leaders' firmly predicted upturn in GCSE results did not come to fruition. A further decline in standards took the school's results for the 2015 cohort of Year 11 pupils to below the government's current minimum floor standards which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

Governing body members rightly were concerned and disappointed with a second year of declining results. Given senior leaders' assertions in relation to the 2014 GCSE results, described as a 'unforeseeable,' as well as senior leaders' firm expectations that 2015 results would go up, governors commissioned an external review of the leadership and management of the school immediately. At the same time, Kent local authority personnel began working more closely alongside the governing body to put together a 70-day improvement plan to be jointly monitored by governors and the local authority. Outcomes from the external review of the leadership and management of the school align with the points for improvement identified at the full inspection which took place in March 2015 concerning leadership and management, and also identify further shortcomings which have been factored into the 70-day plan.

In addition to the review of leadership and management, the governing body has surveyed staff employed at all levels within the school. Staff members appreciate this move and feel that their voice is being heard. Feedback to the governing body from staff members has affirmed the steps taken since the autumn term and reflects a greater feeling of confidence and ownership of the improvement strategy and the empowering leadership of the consultant headteacher. Gaps in the skills or knowledge of senior team members and middle leaders, especially those newly appointed to the school, have been identified and are being addressed carefully by the consultant headteacher. This important strategy is equipping senior staff to play their part in addressing successfully the key points for improvement identified within the report of the full inspection of the school published in March 2015.

During this inspection, visits to lessons being taught across Key Stages 3, 4 and the sixth form in a range of subjects including English, mathematics and science were conducted. Senior leaders have reviewed their self-evaluation in relation to the quality of teaching. They recognise that their previous judgements of teaching were incomplete. Under the guidance of the consultant headteacher they are now using assessment information and work scrutiny to inform their judgements. Previously inflated judgements of how well pupils were learning have been substituted with judgements rooted in more reliable evidence. Senior leaders present with greater confidence in their understanding and ability to recognise and provide evidence of good learning when they see it. They assert that this kind of approach is new to them. During the visits to lessons there was evidence of pupils' improved levels of

engagement with their learning and some improvements in teachers' abilities to plan for pupils' progression. For example, in English pupils were able to explain fully the level of challenge in an analytical writing task, which differed according to the groups in which pupils were working.

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the local authority has commissioned a review of the school's approaches to raising pupils' levels of literacy. Identified actions arising from the review have been included in the 70-day plan. However, additional priorities identified by the consultant headteacher have included, correctly, a focus on writing, which was clear to see from some of the visits to lessons. Leaders recognise that writing needs to be given a higher priority than in the past, owing to the level of difficulty experienced by some pupils on entry to the school.

Similarly, additional priorities have been identified in relation to closing the gap in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Although an external review of pupil premium expenditure conducted in June 2015 heaped praise on leaders in relation to the strong levels of care for disadvantaged pupils, it failed to identify the need for a similarly high focus on improving disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.

Governing body members recognise that there is still much to be achieved, and quickly, if the school is to be judged good at its next full inspection. They have begun to seek out information actively about important aspects of the school's work which was previously unavailable to them, including financial data. This information is enabling them to benchmark the school's performance and see how well it compares with similar schools in terms of value for money. Governors acknowledge that they have been too accepting of leaders' self-evaluation in the past, but are determined to rectify this for the future. To this end they have engaged fully with Kent local authority personnel and are keen to act on the advice they receive. All avenues for securing the most beneficial approach to building success and stability are under consideration, including sponsorship and conversion to academy status.

External support

Officers of the local authority have acted quickly and appropriately to support senior leaders and governors since the decline in results in September. Building on the initial input in the summer term they have increased the level of intervention appropriately. In particular they have helped the Chair of the Governing Body in enabling her to access management and benchmarking information held centrally to which governing bodies are entitled. Equally, officers have endorsed the Chair of Governors' prompt actions to secure effective additional support for the leadership of the school when local authority attempts to source a national leader of education proved difficult.

Input from officers has enabled governors and senior staff to recognise and accept shortcomings of the past at all levels, including in governance. Effective challenge

has also galvanised governors to a state of readiness to act decisively, so that momentum gained during the autumn term is sustained fully and is not lost.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Kent County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector