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John Patino
Principal
The Discovery Academy
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Dear Mr Patino

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Discovery Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 12 November, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in January 2015. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

Yours sincerely

Deborah James
Ofsted Inspector

Copied to:

- Chair of the Governing Body
- Local authority
- CausingConcern.SCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2015

- Improve teaching in order to raise standards in English and mathematics and speed up the progress of all groups of students, especially disadvantaged students, the most-able students and those with special educational needs, by making sure that:
 - all teachers use every opportunity to support students to develop their basic literacy skills in lessons
 - teachers frequently check students' progress in mathematics and accurately identify gaps in their knowledge, understanding and skills so that they can plan targeted activities which will help students to move forward more quickly
 - teachers increase the level of challenge in lessons for all students, especially the most able, by helping students to explore what they are learning in greater detail, so that they can deepen their knowledge and understanding and develop their subject skills
 - all teachers accurately assess students' work so that students know what they have to do to catch up or move forward with their learning more quickly
 - all students know how to respond effectively to subject-specific feedback so that it helps to improve their learning.
- Develop regular opportunities for students to practise and apply their numeracy skills in subjects other than mathematics.
- Reduce the persistent absence of students to at least the overall national average by making sure that:
 - students, parents and the local community become more aware of the direct link between good levels of attendance and achieving well
 - all staff take responsibility for promoting good attendance and ensure that students catch up on the learning they miss when they are away from school.
- Reduce exclusion rates for disadvantaged students to at least the overall national average by making sure that effective systems to manage and improve the behaviour of those students who do not conform to the academy's expectations are consistently implemented.
- Improve leadership and management so that all actions drive improvements in students' achievement by: supporting and challenging middle leaders, particularly in mathematics, to speed up the progress made by all groups of students making sure that all teachers precisely target their support for students who are falling behind in their achievement making sure that the spending of the pupil premium funding has a direct impact on the achievement, behaviour and attendance of disadvantaged students.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 12 November 2015

Evidence

The inspector met with the Principal, groups of pupils, senior and middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, who is also a representative of the sponsor, and the vice-chair of the governing body. The inspector also made a number of brief visits to lessons and reviewed the academy's documentation, including the evidence provided by external reviews of the academy's performance.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection there has been further change in the mathematics department; a new head of mathematics began work in July and a lead practitioner has been appointed to start work in January. The Principal, who is also the executive principal of the trust, is leaving the academy in December and the current vice-principal has been promoted to Principal. Two new senior leaders have been appointed, with expertise in English and mathematics. The appointment of an executive principal of the trust academies is still underway. There has been a restructuring of the academy trust and the academy governance arrangements to give greater clarity to different roles. A new Chair of the Governing Body will begin in December.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leaders and governors gather good-quality information about the academy's performance and use it effectively to drive improvements. They recognise the need for urgency in the actions required to improve outcomes for pupils. They have put in place systems and processes that allow them to carefully monitor the impact of the academy's work.

Trustees and governors are committed to carefully monitoring the work of the academy and holding senior leaders to account. In particular, the fortnightly meetings between the governors' executive board and senior leaders are an embedded and valued part of this process. They are highly effective in ensuring that senior leaders focus on the impact of their actions, adapting their plans as necessary to sustain the pace of improvement. These meetings have been particularly effective in keeping underachieving groups, for example disadvantaged pupils, to the forefront of the academy's work.

This model of regular meetings, focused on the impact of actions, is then replicated at the next leadership level in the academy where senior leaders meet weekly with their link faculty leaders to ensure that they are taking action to support pupils' achievement. These actions have led to some notable improvements in the 2015 examination results. For example, the proportion of pupils making the expected level of progress in English rose from 47% to 70%.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Unvalidated examination results in 2015 provided by the academy improved in a number of key areas. The proportion of pupils reaching the key benchmark of 5 or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics rose to 43% from 36% in the previous year. Examination results also improved in English, science, languages, information and communication technology and physical education.
- Standards of teaching are also improving and pupils comment positively on the support and commitment of their teachers. Teachers are generally planning and delivering lessons that are closely matched to the ability of pupils in their classes. However, on occasions some pupils are not encouraged to take on more challenging activities that they see as too hard.
- All teachers have undergone additional training in supporting the development of basic literacy. Reading ages are carefully tracked and pupils are provided with different strategies to help them improve their reading. There has been an improvement in reading scores in all year groups. Teachers are also using a number of techniques to help develop pupils' oracy and increasing opportunities for them to write at length.
- Marking and assessment are now strengths of the academy's work. Teachers consistently use an agreed model of marking that helps pupils understand the strengths, weaknesses and next steps in their work. Pupils agreed that they found marking helpful in making sure they knew what they needed to do to improve their work.
- Attendance improved last year and already this term there has been a 0.7% increase in attendance compared to the same period last year. Staff are carefully tracking pupils' attendance and putting in place additional help, for example collection in the academy minibus, if they notice attendance is slipping.
- Staff and pupils were very positive about the improvements in behaviour seen over recent months. A new behaviour management system is in place and pupils value the emphasis on rewards for good behaviour. Pupils take pride in their work and appearance. The number of fixed-term exclusions is falling and fewer incidents of poor behaviour are being reported in lessons.
- The gap in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and others in English and mathematics is closing. The progress of disadvantaged pupils is improving at a faster rate than that of other pupils at the academy. Attendance rates for disadvantaged pupils are also improving but the academy recognises that the attendance gap between these pupils and their peers is still too large.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Despite improvements in pupils' performance in mathematics since 2014, examination results this summer were still well below national levels. Only 47% of pupils made the expected level of progress. Current pupils are benefiting from better teaching in mathematics but the legacy of previous poor teaching means that some pupils still lack confidence in their ability to succeed in mathematics.
- Senior leaders have yet to put in place an academy-wide programme to develop numeracy skills across the curriculum. All pupils have some numeracy activities once a week in form time but this work has yet to show the coherence and impact of the whole-school literacy activities.
- Current Year 11 pupils do not follow courses across a broad range of GCSE subjects. The academy curriculum is gradually changing with more pupils in Years 9 and 10 following courses in humanities and modern foreign languages, for example. However, it is likely to be a number of years before these changes have a full impact on pupils' achievement.

External support

Governors and trustees have arranged for a wide range of external support and monitoring activities to be put in place. Specialist teachers from a number of local schools and academies have provided individual support for faculty leaders. This support for activities such as teaching observations and marking reviews allow governors to have confidence in the reported standards in the academy's work.