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Mr Andy McBurnie
Headteacher
The Cottesloe School
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Dear Mr McBurnie

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Cottesloe School

Following my visit to your school on 7 March, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the 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 October 2012. 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 section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- improve marking by making sure all students receive a high degree of challenge in the feedback from all teachers
- ensure all leaders are continually checking how quickly gaps in students' achievement are closing, especially students supported through pupil premium funding.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you and your senior leaders, a group of your curriculum leaders, students from the sixth form, Years 9 and 11, and members of the governing body. I also had a telephone discussion with a representative from the local authority. I evaluated your school development plan, reviewed minutes of governing body meetings and scrutinised students' work. I briefly visited lessons

with two of your senior leaders to assess the school's work to improve teaching, the quality of marking, students' attitudes to learning and their response to feedback from teachers.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection several teachers have left the school, the senior leadership team has been restructured and there is a new Vice Chair of the Governing Body.

Main findings

You and your senior leaders continue to work tirelessly to reduce the stubborn pattern of low attainment and inconsistency in rates of progress of student groups. There are signs of improvement, such as the humanities results last year. Despite this, some students in Year 11, and in some courses in the sixth form, did not do as well as predicted in 2013. This further highlighted the need to secure much better teaching throughout the school and make sure that students have every opportunity to deepen their subject knowledge, skills and application as they move from Year 7 to 11 and in sixth-form courses.

You responded in a robust manner to the disappointments last year by challenging all staff and students to do much better and be aspirational in what they can achieve. You and your governors have taken tough decisions about pay and rewards for teachers and support staff. Staff receive clear messages that unless there is demonstrable evidence of typically good teaching and improved student performance, they will not progress up the pay spine.

Equally, staff receive a clear message that if they want to improve their teaching they will receive good quality, regular support from leaders. The coaching programmes and teacher development policy are securing better teaching, and in some subjects there is much better marking and guidance to students to help them improve their work.

Students have welcomed the introduction of 'fix it' time in lessons to respond to feedback. We agreed that leaders must secure consistency in all subjects, so that marking is always developmental and stretches students' subject knowledge. In lessons I visited some books were regularly marked and attention was paid to correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar as well as developing students' knowledge. Disappointingly, there were also books in the lower school and in the sixth form that have not been marked recently. My scrutiny of students' books revealed some good presentation and thoughtful work, for example in English, in some mathematics books and in geography. Some books in mathematics and science are scrappy and poorly presented.

In the English and physics lessons I visited, students were attentive, keen to learn and responded well to the group activities. In the Year 10 top-set mathematics class, students were enthusiastic and commented on how pleased they are with the hard work they receive to stretch them towards attaining higher GCSE grades. In the Year 9 science lesson, the pace was not right, hand-outs lacked purpose and students were losing interest within the first ten minutes of the lesson. The litter in two classrooms was sad to see and reflects poor respect for these classrooms.

Sitting in your 'war room' during my visit and scrutinising the tracking documents on display, it is clear that there is regular scrutiny of students' achievement, attendance and behaviour which guides your determination to help students do better. Intervention work is well planned. There are now robust systems now in place for setting targets for teaching assistants to make sure their work is measured against students' achievement.

Your new 'Engage to Learn' six-week programme for a few students who cause low level disruption is well thought out, with positive impact for those who find paying attention a challenge. There is good work with external agencies to support vulnerable students, especially those who join Cottesloe following exclusion from other schools.

You and your leadership team have radically improved the system for collating information and checking students' achievement over time. Data is analysed at a micro level because you and your leaders know students very well. The next development must be to focus on the 'bigger picture' so that all leaders including your curriculum leaders, can check which students are making four levels of progress to attain higher A* and A GCSE grades. Leaders have a sound grasp of students currently working at marginal grades C and D for GCSE. However, they are not always focused on stretching the most able students quickly enough. Your head of sixth form has a secure understanding of why some students are not progressing as they should and is tackling weaknesses in teaching effectively.

Senior leaders are acutely aware of the need to close remaining gaps in the performance of students supported through the pupil premium and their peers, and reduce the variations between students' achievement in subjects at AS and A level. Current in-school information shows gaps in the performance of students supported through the pupil premium are closing quicker in Key Stage 3 and in Year 10 than in Year 11. There is still some way to go to make sure that these students in Year 11 meet and exceed national expectations for progress in English and mathematics before July 2014.

Senior leaders are holding middle leaders to account much more than previously. Regular meetings help you challenge your middle leaders about how they are developing typically good teaching and checking work in their departments. Not enough checking is taking place across departments to help all curriculum leaders

pinpoint where the best practice is in planning, teachers' marking and students' progress.

All students I met with were effusive about how much the school is improving. They know that leaders are striving to make Cottesloe a good school. They agree that behaviour and teaching are improving. One student said she is now proud to say she is Cottesloe student because students work harder, are nicer and care more for each other. They are pleased that the new Student Charter sets out clear values for everyone to uphold. The students I met with are great ambassadors for Cottesloe. They are confident, articulate, keen to learn, aspirational and they are determined to make sure that the public perception of their school continues to improve.

An external review has guided successfully the development of better governance. This can be seen in the improving quality of governors' questioning, their understanding of students' achievement, and the typicality of teaching over time. Governors are more tenacious, and as a result of training are more confident in challenging leaders. Their more strategic approach can be seen in a revised committee structure and clearer roles for governors linked to departments. This is providing them with a more comprehensive picture about how all aspects of the school are improving. Minutes of meetings are recording more detail about debate and action points. The long-standing clerk confirms that there has never been such a degree of challenge. However, all governors need to be more inquisitive about the targets for and progress of students supported through the pupil premium.

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

External support

The local authority has an accurate view of the current progress of the school. Regular support from school improvement advisers is helping senior leaders verify whether or not their judgments about teaching and marking over time are accurate. For the most part this is accurate. However, there are inconsistencies in the quality of students' work in their books. This is not given sufficient attention when leaders and advisers undertake joint observations of teaching. Working with a national leader of governance and the local authority, governors are benefitting from additional training to hone their skills. The school is benefitting from partnership work with the Wing liaison group and the PiXL organisation.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Joanna Beckford-Hall
Her Majesty's Inspector