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Tony Withell
Principal
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Dear Mr Withell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Buckinghamshire UTC

Following my visit to your school on 16 January 2017, 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 January 2016. 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:

- improve pupil progress and outcomes in the core subjects at key stage 4 by:
 - continuing to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in English and mathematics
 - urgently addressing the underperformance in science
- analyse more rigorously the impact of the pupil premium funding used to support disadvantaged pupils
- improve attendance, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils, girls and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the vice principal, other leaders and members of the governing body, including representatives of some of the sponsors, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I visited classrooms with the vice principal where I talked to pupils and looked at their work. I evaluated a range of documents including the school's improvement plans.

Context

The previous principal left the school in April 2016 and you joined the following month. In the past year, four teachers have left the school, two have joined and a new data specialist has been employed.

Main findings

You and the senior team are showing great determination and are acting with urgency to address the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. Following your appointment, you straightaway engaged with external support to coordinate a raft of staff training and quickly implemented a more distributed leadership model in order to build capacity within the school. Staff and governors share your sense of urgency in bringing about the necessary improvements. You and your vice principal are very visible around the UTC and have good working relationships with the pupils. While leaders' actions are improving the quality of assessment and monitoring systems, the quality of teaching is not yet consistently good in the core GCSE subjects in key stage 4. However, the higher standards in vocational subjects have been maintained.

Governors are highly committed to the UTC ethos and very supportive of the changes that you and your team have made. They responded to the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and commissioned an external review of governance. This resulted in a reorganisation of the governing body facilitating a clearer focus on challenging improvements to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Governors have received valuable training on using assessment information, which they are now beginning to use to challenge school leaders. However, they rightly recognise that they require more training to improve their understanding of what constitutes good teaching and learning in the GCSE core subjects. Consequently, they have wisely commissioned a second external review of governance that is currently underway.

The inspection in January 2016 recommended an external review of the impact of pupil premium funding. Changes to leadership caused a delay in this happening. Governors have now commissioned this review which is scheduled to take place later this month. Although the vice principal has recently developed new plans to meet the needs of disadvantaged pupils, these have not yet been put into place.

Governors and leaders recognise that evaluating the impact of pupil premium funding needs to be given greater priority.

Strategies to build the capacity of senior and middle leadership have been well received and are yielding success. Working with external consultants, the data specialist and senior leaders have introduced new assessment and tracking systems in key stage 4. Senior leaders have set higher targets, coordinated a range of bespoke training for teachers, and now routinely check pupils' progress through regular monitoring of teaching and learning. Visiting teachers from the Herts & Bucks Teaching School Alliance have supported English and mathematics teachers to raise their game by improving the quality of their questioning and challenge. Lessons are now more focused and support better understanding of examination technique. However, leaders are aware that more needs to be done to share best practice between vocational and GCSE subjects.

Leaders and governors have challenged weaknesses in teaching and devised individual plans which offer effective support. Staffing turbulence has impacted negatively upon the quality of teaching in science and caused a significant decline in standards and pupil outcomes since the inspection. Aware of this, leaders have taken appropriate action to secure further support for the department. This includes the very recent recruitment of an additional teacher to support raising standards in science.

Pupils are starting to make better progress in English and mathematics because those who are falling behind are now identified and supported more quickly and effectively. Teachers are starting to use performance information to check what pupils can already do and to devise learning tasks to address the knowledge, understanding and skills that different groups of pupils and individuals need to acquire in order to improve. While it is in its early stages, this approach is ensuring that GCSE lessons in English and mathematics are clearly focused on raising the attainment of pupils. More needs to be done to ensure that this happens more effectively in science.

In the lessons I visited with the vice principal, the atmosphere was calm and most pupils were on task. However, teachers' expectations in the core subjects, particularly for the most able, were not high enough. In my meeting with pupils, they spoke with justifiable pride about their recent achievements and aspirations for future study in their construction and computing courses. However, the pupils were less effusive about their engagement, progress and achievement in the core subjects. This is reflected in the lack of pride and some unfinished work in too many pupils' GCSE books. Although leaders have set suitably ambitious targets for pupils, more work needs to be done to continue to raise the quality of teaching and pupils' engagement in English, mathematics and, particularly, science. Core subject leaders are aware of this and are beginning to alter their teaching plans to ensure that pupils are offered more relevant and engaging learning activities. Teachers still need to set higher expectations for the standard of work that they expect and to

ensure that pupils are aware of their target grades and what they need to do to achieve them.

Around the UTC, pupils are smart, presentable and talk with pride about their ambitions for the future. They particularly value the high-quality work placement opportunities and support from staff in preparing them for future career opportunities. Briefing time in the mornings is used well to help pupils to prepare for their learning, and tutor time in the afternoons provides opportunities for personal, social, health and economic education, and for pupils to consider current affairs. While there are opportunities for pupils to engage in sporting activities by using the facilities of the neighbouring college, some pupils report that they would like more extra-curricular sports.

Strong leadership of the additional learning support team has improved the effectiveness of support for vulnerable pupils, and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, since the inspection. The head of additional learning support works closely with her team and the data specialist to monitor progress and to design a range of bespoke support for pupils. Detailed record-keeping enables analysis of the impact of interventions and refinements where necessary. As a result of this work, leaders are able to reliably predict significantly improved forecasts for the achievement of current Year 11 pupils.

Buckinghamshire UTC currently has 145 pupils on roll and is far from full capacity. Responding to this, you have raised the profile of the school and improved the recruitment of pupils. Achievements of pupils are now regularly celebrated in the press and you developed new taster days for Year 9 pupils. This has resulted in an increased number of applications for places at the UTC next year. Overall attendance figures last year were well below the national average. Leaders and governors recognise that the current small size of the UTC, coupled with a higher-than-average proportion of pupils with ill health and/or complex needs, has had an impact upon these figures. Through the effective work of the additional learning support team, improved family liaison and working with outside agencies, middle leaders are making improvements. Leaders are rightly prioritising this work to continue in order to ensure that all pupils, particularly the disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, attend at least in line with national averages.

External support

The school has received a range of appropriate and timely support from the Herts & Bucks Teaching Schools Alliance and the Baker Dearing Educational Trust. Training for leaders has resulted in improved leadership and management of assessment and monitoring systems in key stage 4. In addition, the alliance has delivered bespoke practical support through regular training and mentoring of staff and the teaching of some classes by lead practitioners. This has helped to improve standards in English and mathematics over the last year. Recognising that there is more to be done to

improve teachers' expertise and capacity within the school, you have wisely commissioned a second year of this support from the alliance.

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

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector