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Mr Nigel Croft
Principal
Redborne Upper School and Community College
Flitwick Road
Ampthill
Bedfordshire
MK45 2NU

Dear Nigel

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Redborne Upper School and Community College

Following my visit to your academy on 14 May, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged students. The inspection focused on the achievement of leaders, including governors, in improving outcomes for this group.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, and also met with middle leaders, representatives of the governing body, and other members of staff. I scrutinised documentation relating to the attendance, achievement and destinations of disadvantaged students; I looked at governors' minutes and the academy's policy, planning and review documents together with information relating to the performance management of teachers. I met with several groups of students to discuss their learning and to look at their work.

Context

The academy has not been inspected since 2008, when its predecessor school's overall effectiveness was judged to be outstanding. A recently-appointed assistant principal leads the academy's provision for disadvantaged students. The academy's catchment area has grown in recent years, as has the proportion of students

attending the academy who are disadvantaged. However, this remains significantly below the national average. Typically, on entry to the academy disadvantaged students' prior attainment is significantly lower, overall, than that of other students.

The impact of leadership and management in raising achievement of disadvantaged students

In 2012 and 2013, the gap between the achievement of the academy's disadvantaged students at GCSE and others nationally was smaller than the national average. In 2014, this gap widened substantially. However, the personal circumstances of a significant proportion of students within this very small cohort impacted upon their achievement. Their peers made at least the expected level of progress from their individual starting points in English and mathematics. The published headline figures for 2014 are also misleadingly low because they do not include all of the qualifications achieved by these students. The academy's monitoring information indicates that within the current Year 11, gaps are narrowing considerably, and that in some year groups, disadvantaged students are making more rapid progress than their classmates. Typically, the small number of disadvantaged students who join the academy's sixth form achieve at least as well as others with similar prior attainment. Over time, looked after children make good progress during their time at the academy; vulnerable students are very well supported.

The academy's curriculum is sufficiently broad and balanced to ensure each student can study qualifications that meet their interests, needs and abilities. The academy's independent careers advice is highly effective in ensuring that all disadvantaged students are able to make an appropriate transition to further education, employment or training at the age of 16. Senior leaders monitor the destinations of those who leave the academy at 16 and can demonstrate successful outcomes for these students, as well as for the small but growing number who join the academy's sixth form. These students are as likely as their classmates to make successful applications to university because of the support that they receive. During the inspection, students made clear that they are equally well-supported if they choose to take up an apprenticeship or seek employment.

The recently-appointed assistant principal who leads provision for disadvantaged students works with other leaders to track each student carefully, and has an overview of all aspects of each student's provision. Information about each individual's personal circumstances, attendance, behaviour and progress is used to help plan both for effective transition, and on-going provision for all. Senior and middle leaders, including subject leaders and Heads of Year, make good use of very detailed assessment information to review the progress of disadvantaged students and identify any who are at risk of falling behind. Intervention in preparation for GCSE examinations is precisely targeted on the particular areas of a subject or a topic that individuals need additional help with. Leaders track the impact of this extra support carefully, and make changes where necessary.

The academy's leaders recognise that the absence rates and fixed term exclusion figures for disadvantaged students were too high in 2013/14. These figures were skewed by a very small number of students with particular personal circumstances. Well-focused work with individuals has led to a dramatic reduction in fixed term exclusions and to an improvement in the attendance of some. Leaders monitor the absence of each individual very carefully and track the impact that it has upon progress; however, some students and parents do not fully appreciate the impact of poor attendance upon achievement. Leaders do not generally engage with parents directly about their child's attendance until it has dropped below 90%. It remains the case that disadvantaged students are more likely than others to be persistent absentees or excluded from school.

Most teachers are using monitoring information to plan activities that are appropriately challenging, and put in place additional support that is usually well-targeted so individuals can catch up. During the inspection, students were able to discuss the kinds of changes they make to their work in response to the regular feedback that they receive. They generally spoke positively about the impact teaching has on their learning, and indicated that they feel well supported by their teachers. Leaders have identified that the techniques some teachers use to help those who start at the academy having made limited progress in Years 7 and 8 to catch up have had limited impact. Plans are in place to address this.

The governing body shares the determination of senior leaders that all students will do well, and make good progress from their individual starting points. Governors receive regular information about the progress and achievement of disadvantaged students, and use this to hold leaders to account. Governors consider research evidence about the most effective ways to use additional resources to support disadvantaged students; they also challenge leaders to demonstrate the impact of previous spending. This established, for example, that a one-to-one mentoring programme had less impact on the progress of disadvantaged students than anticipated. Governors agreed instead to use funding to reduce class sizes within English and mathematics, and provide disadvantaged students with individualised 'study skills' support; their scrutiny of monitoring data indicates this has had greater impact.

External support

Senior leaders work effectively with other schools in order to confirm the accuracy of the marks and grades that teachers apply to students' work. The Principal, who is a Local Leader of Education (LLE), provides support to senior leaders in other schools.

The strengths in the academy's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- Leaders, including governors, are determined to ensure that all students can achieve well. Senior leaders use all of the information available to them about the

progress, attendance and behaviour of individuals to plan the best ways to support them. They review the impact of this work carefully.

- Rigorous self-evaluation helps leaders to plan changes and improvements. Leaders and teachers are held accountable for the achievement of disadvantaged students through the performance management process and monitoring activities.
- Leaders, including governors, monitor the achievement of students carefully. Most teachers use assessment information to plan precise intervention to help those who are struggling. Students say they are well supported.
- The wide range of courses available to students ensures that all can follow a tailored programme that matches their abilities, needs and interests. Independent careers advice and guidance helps to ensure that students choose courses that allow them to access further or higher education, employment or training after leaving the academy.

The weaknesses in the academy's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- The impact of work to help parents to understand both how they can best support their children's learning, and the impact of poor attendance upon it, is limited.
- The strategies used by some teachers to help those who have made slow progress in Years 7-8 to catch up when they join the academy have had limited impact. This has limited the progress made by these students.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to reduce the comparatively high figures for fixed term exclusions and absence of disadvantaged students.
- Ensure parents understand the importance of high attendance and gain a greater understanding of the ways in which they can support their children's education.
- Ensure that all teachers help those students who join the academy having made limited progress in Years 7 and 8 to catch up quickly.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Bedfordshire, to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector