



Department
for Education

Department for Education
Eastbrook
Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge
CB2 8DR
rsc.eastnelondon@education.gsi.gov.uk

Karl Wainwright, Chair
The St Neots Learning Partnership
Longsands Academy
Longsands Road
St Neots
Cambridgeshire
PE19 1LQ

6th May 2016

Dear Mr Wainwright

Please pass on my thanks to Rick for receiving the recent visit by Mike Phipps to Ernulf Academy in St Neots, for sharing the response to this summer's results at Key Stage 4, and for talking about the trust's plans for the future.

The regional office of the Department for Education has four priorities:

- to develop the capacity of multi-academy trusts to support others
- to support and challenge underperforming academies
- to increase the number of free schools
- to encourage greater collaboration to develop a self-improving school led system

A crucial part of the RSC role is to hold academy trusts to account for the performance of any schools in their trust. We decided that the best way to understand what is happening in schools was to visit rather than rely just on published data. Our Education Advisers made over 200 visits to academies last year and gained a strong understanding of the individual issues each school faces and the actions being taken to improve outcomes for pupils. Visits are generally for half a day or less and aim not to be a burden on a school.

Where progress or plans for improvements are not sufficient, taking into account Ofsted reports and contextual information, then formal intervention such as pre-warning and warning notices will be considered. Last year after 200 visits to academies just 11 pre-warning and warning notices were issued.

Mike enjoyed his visit and he was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about the school. He found it very useful to talk to academy leaders about the school's performance, and to discuss their plans for future improvements.

The visit followed Key Stage 4 results in 2015 which were below the government's current floor standards. The proportions of students gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics rose slightly from 35% in 2014 to 36% in 2015, well below the national average. In 2015 the proportion of students in Year 11 making expected progress in English, at 69%, was in line with the national average but below floor standard levels. The proportion making expected progress in maths, at 55%, was well below both the national average and floor standard level. In 2015 the gap between the academy's disadvantaged pupils and others widened. Disadvantaged pupils were more than one full GCSE grade behind other pupils in the academy in both English and mathematics. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics was 12%, compared with 44% of other pupils in the academy. This poor performance of disadvantaged pupils prompted a letter from the RSC earlier this year.

These results, however, do not reflect the evident improvements in the academy since it received a DfE warning letter in March 2015. Senior leadership has been substantially strengthened by the trust, including by securing two senior leaders from Longsands Academy, and by the appointment of Rick, the CEO of the trust, as acting headteacher from January 2016. Emulf now benefits from senior leaders who offer a strong sense of purpose and clear-sighted leadership, based on an accurate and honest self-evaluation. Clear plans for improvement are in place which have had a very positive impact in a short time on the quality of teaching and on students' behaviour.

During the visit Rick accompanied Mike on a tour of the school where they visited some classrooms. All students they saw had very positive attitudes to learning, and were fully focussed on their learning. Much teaching was lively and engaging. Relationships between teachers and students are warm and respectful. Teachers know their students well as individuals, and work successfully to boost the confidence of pupils who may find aspects of the work difficult. The work that teachers set is well matched to students' different levels of ability, and in Key Stage 4 is often centred on the skills that students need to be successful in public examinations. Students in different years are aware of their target grades and their current level of performance. Teachers' marking is now detailed and frequent, and provides clear next steps to help students improve their work. Students respond regularly to this advice using a different coloured pen.

Mike enjoyed meeting a group of students from Years 10 and 11, who spoke very positively about their experiences in the school. They are clear that the school is much better now than it was twelve months ago. They said that students' behaviour is better, and teachers now make them work harder than before. They find teachers' marking helpful in improving their work, but say systems are not yet consistently applied by all teachers. Students enjoy the fact that the school listens more to their views and takes action on them, and gives

them more leadership roles and responsibilities. They said they would recommend the school to others because teachers know them well, and care about them as individuals, not just about their academic work. They told Mike that although there are still a small number of students who behave less well, bullying and racism are almost unknown. However, they feel the school could do more to raise awareness of, and to combat, any homophobic comments that occasionally happen.

Mike was impressed by school leaders' clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement in its self-evaluation. Student progress data is used effectively to track very closely the progress of individuals and groups of students across all year groups. Appropriate intervention is then put in place. However, owing to a legacy of weaker teaching and consequent slower student progress in the past, some outcomes for students remain slow to improve. Academy leaders rightly judge that in Ofsted terms, outcomes for students still require improvement.

School leaders' predictions for 2016 are that the proportions of students gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics are likely to rise to 48%. The proportions of students making expected progress are predicted to rise to 75% in English but to only 53% in maths. This is due to a legacy of weaker teaching and a lack of continuity in staffing in the maths department in the past. The school's indicative Progress 8 figure in 2016 is predicted to be -0.16, which would put it as a weaker performer compared to other schools nationally. Predictions in the past have mostly been accurate, and moderation processes include comparisons with Longsands, the partner school in the academy trust, so these predictions appear reliable. There is evidence that students in other year groups are making good progress.

Concerns remain in the performance of some groups of students, especially the school's disadvantaged students. The gap between disadvantaged students' achievement in maths and that of other students is predicted to narrow in 2016, owing to various intervention strategies which aim to help disadvantaged students overcome any areas of difficulty. However, the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others in English is anticipated to widen further in 2016. The academy's most able students do not achieve as well as they could, and are predicted to continue to make slower progress than other students in 2016.

In previous academic years, we have often followed up visits with a request for an update via what we have called a 'scorecard'. This year we have reduced the burden of this request by asking instead for a copy of updates provided by headteachers to their academy trusts about predicted results for summer 2016. I would find it very helpful if in the next few weeks you or the Headteacher could let me know (most easily via RSC.EASTNELONDON@education.gsi.gov.uk) the schedule you have for updates during the year to the trust on expectations for results next summer. If it is easier we are happy to receive one update from the trust for all your schools. It would be helpful if this update includes a separate analysis of

predicted results for disadvantaged students, and for the academy's most able students.

We know that the work of academy trustees, school leaders and teachers is very demanding and we know that you do it because you believe that the pupils for whom you work deserve the best education possible. We are pleased to be working with you on this.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Coulson'. The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Tim Coulson
Regional Schools Commissioner, East of England and North East London