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Mr James Shapland
Headteacher
Ashlyns School
Chesham Road
Berkhamsted
HP4 3AH

Dear Mr Shapland

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to Ashlyns School

Following my visit to your school on 15 March 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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 on 4 December 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with the headteacher and the senior leadership team, three members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a group of students. I evaluated the school improvement plan and made brief visits to a small number of lessons, accompanied by the headteacher.

Context

Since the previous section 5 inspection, there have been no contextual changes to the school.

Main findings

The Senior Leadership Team has written an improvement plan to tackle all of the areas for improvement identified in the last section 5 inspection. The plan states clearly when progress will be measured and how, and who is responsible for monitoring it. Senior leaders are making a concerted effort to raise the profile of effective teaching. They are providing valuable support to teachers whose teaching is not yet consistently good through regular discussions on what good teaching looks like and observing lessons. They have identified that some teachers are focusing too much on telling students what they will be doing in the lesson without making clear to them what they expect them to learn from these activities.

Senior leaders' analysis of the achievement of individual students is now sharper and has extended beyond those students in Year 11. Consequently, any student who is at risk of underachieving is identified swiftly and supported to get back on track. Senior leaders are starting to hold subject leaders more to account for how well students achieve through regular line-management discussions. Subject reviews are proving useful in identifying strengths and areas for development, but are not yet focused enough on the academic performance of different groups of students. Teachers' marking is improving following a new system which invites students to respond. My scrutiny of students' books during visits to lessons shows that students' response to teachers' comments remains variable.

The school continues to employ a number of agency teachers to cover staff illness and maternity leave, including in mathematics. Students believe they make slower progress in some of these lessons. The modern foreign languages faculty is not yet performing to full capacity as one of the school's specialist subjects, and too few students achieve the top grades in Spanish. The students I spoke to expressed mixed opinions about modern foreign languages.

The governing body demonstrates a strong awareness of what needs to improve to secure a 'good' judgement for the school's overall effectiveness. They have wisely produced their own action plan to enable them to both challenge and support the school's senior leaders more effectively.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- focus more sharply on the performance of different groups of students when reviewing the performance of faculties
- ensure that all teachers make clear to students at the start of lessons what they expect students to learn, and not solely what they expect them to do
- ensure recently introduced systems and procedures are adhered to by all staff
- strengthen the capacity of the modern foreign languages faculty.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

School leaders and members of the governing body value the additional support provided by the local authority. The local authority is effectively providing support to improve areas for development. This includes a Hertfordshire Improvement Partner working with all heads of faculty to analyse examination performance, targeted advisory support to raise standards in English and modern foreign languages, and supporting the school in managing the planned transition to secondary school status in September 2013.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector