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Mr Simon Knight  
Headteacher  
The Helena Romanes School & Sixth Form Centre  
Parsonage Downs  
Great Dunmow  
Essex  
CM6 2AU

Dear Mr Knight

### **No formal designation monitoring inspection of Helena Romanes School**

Following my visit with Anthony Sharpe, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 6 May 2015, 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 pupils. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management, including governance, at the school.

### **Evidence**

During the visit, inspectors held meetings with you and other senior leaders. They met with subject leaders for English and mathematics, a governor representative and groups of students from Key Stages 3 and 4 and the sixth form. Inspectors took into account the views of parents through the outcomes of the school's own survey, met with the special educational need coordinator, the head of sixth form and the pupil premium leader. Inspectors scrutinised documentation relating to the achievement, attendance and post-16 destinations of disadvantaged pupils, and analysed the school's improvement plan and self-evaluation documents. During the inspection Year 5 pupils from local primary schools were taking part in lessons. Inspectors observed these lessons accompanied by the Helena Romanes primary school liaison officer

## **Context**

The academy was last inspected in November 2012, when its overall effectiveness was judged to be good. Since the inspection there have been many changes in staffing, particularly with regard to English and mathematics. The school takes pupils from a wide range of schools within the locality, and has good links with regard to transition arrangements for students with these schools.

### **The impact of leadership and management on raising achievement of disadvantaged students**

The school's self-evaluation is accurate overall, but lacks specific consideration of the achievement and attendance of disadvantaged pupils. It does not include detail in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of the actions the school takes to meet the needs of its disadvantaged pupils. The school's analysis is not regularly updated with recent information on the progress of these groups. This limits its usefulness in terms of planning effectively to improve provision. As a result leaders and governors have difficulty in holding staff to account. Insufficient comparisons are made with nationally published information in order to benchmark the school's performance against the attainment of other students nationally

Assessment information shows that students' attendance across the school as a whole is improving over time, and that the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is increasing at a faster rate than that of other students. Although the gap in attendance between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is closing, because their starting point was lower this is not closing quickly enough.

Leaders manage the transition from primary school well. They accurately identify when additional provision is needed to ensure the successful transition of disadvantaged pupils to secondary school. For example, where appropriate, they implement additional help such as nurture group provision, extra support for literacy and numeracy skills or additional challenge for the more able as students enter school. The curriculum at Key Stage 3 ensures that the needs of these learners are well met. The provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs is well-managed. Consequently the pupils who are in receipt of free school meals and have special educational needs are particularly well-provided for. Their progress is accelerated because the special educational needs coordinator keeps a close check on their work and intervenes quickly when progress starts to slip. Similarly, the achievement of the small number of looked after children is monitored well and more are continuing to the sixth form or attending further education courses at local colleges.

All pupils receive individual advice regarding courses and appropriate routes in further education or work. As a result disadvantaged students and looked after children have similar high aspirations to their peers. They understand the different routes into further and higher education and employment, and value the guidance they receive.

Middle leaders provide additional opportunities to accelerate the progress of learners in Key Stage 4. Additional classes focus on developing effective writing, and an accelerated reading programme is in place. The detailed tracking and revision of these programmes means that students are well supported to make better progress. Students' work is analysed at a detailed level and plans for teaching are adjusted accordingly. Similar provision and the mentoring of students who fall behind is having a beneficial impact on the progress of Key Stage 3 students. This is reflected in the progress they make in their work over time.

Leaders responsible for different subjects have a good understanding of achievement and the quality of provision within their areas of responsibility. However, the information from these individual subject evaluations is not combined well to create an accurate overview of the trends and patterns in the progress of different groups, including disadvantaged pupils.

The school's records of challenging behaviour are detailed and staff track incidents involving disadvantaged students over time. The number of such incidents has decreased. Discussions with students of all ages agreed that behaviour around the school and in lessons was good and continues to improve further. They feel safe and know that any concerns regarding bullying will be heard and acted upon. They value the support given by teachers and staff responsible for their pastoral care. As a result disadvantaged pupils are well supported to better engage with their learning.

The school website gives details of how the extra funding received for disadvantaged students is used. Although this celebrates the improving attainment for this group, it does not give detailed information to parents on the progress students make. For example the school does not report the gap in progress between this group and their peers either in school or nationally. This gap is not closing sufficiently rapidly in mathematics.

Governors have some understanding of how well students have achieved over time. They recognise the areas for improvement that the school has identified are the correct ones, and understand how these arise from identified weaknesses. Until recently they have not been sufficiently robust in challenging leaders. They have not ensured that the school monitors its performance with equal rigour against published national standards, by ensuring the performance of disadvantaged students is compared to all students' nationally. The recent training in data management and analysis, attended by all governors, has been key to their improved ability to effectively challenge the information leaders share. Governors have increased their expectations of the information they receive from leaders about students' performance. These changes are too new to have made a difference yet.

### **External support**

The local authority has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and has involved leaders in supporting improvement work with other

schools. It recognises the need to provide further support and challenge with regard to the achievement and attendance of disadvantaged pupils in the school.

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

- effective transition arrangements from primary school allow the school to intervene early and accurately in order to support disadvantaged pupils who are underachieving
- older students receive guidance on the full range of education and employment pathways available. Disadvantaged pupils have the same high aspirations as their peers
- school leaders provide effective support for students who are disabled, or who have special educational needs. The progress of disadvantaged students in this group is accelerated as a result.

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

- the achievement of disadvantaged students is not yet a key priority in the school's own self-evaluation and strategic planning. As a result, leaders do not hold staff fully to account for the difference they make to the achievement and well-being of this group of students
- reviews of the school's work are not sharp enough. Governors have not challenged leaders sufficiently regarding the achievement of disadvantaged students
- the school's reports to parents on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, through its website, are not complete. They do not focus on how well the school is closing the gaps between the progress of these pupils and their peers within school or nationally.

**Priorities for further improvement**

- Using all of the evidence available, be more focused about the actions necessary to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged students. Ensure that the progress of disadvantaged pupils is monitored and evaluated as part of the drive to improve the achievement of all groups.
- Retain the current focus on improving the attendance and reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions of disadvantaged students.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Essex, 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

Mary Rayner

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

- Chair of the Governing Body
- Local authority
- Department of Education
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA)