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Mr L Kane  
Principal  
Astor College  
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Dear Mr Kane

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Astor College**

Following my visit to your school on 25 January 2016, 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 July 2015. 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 recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

### **Evidence**

During the inspection, I met with you and the previous interim principal, senior and middle leaders, and the Chairs of the Board of Directors and Advisory Board to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met leaders from other schools in The Dover Federation for the Arts and from Duke of York's Royal Military School. We briefly visited a number of lessons around the school to see teaching and learning. I evaluated a range of documents, including the school's improvement plans.

## **Context**

Following the section 5 inspection the principal left the school. In September, a headteacher from one of the schools in The Dover Federation for the Arts took up post as interim principal and led the school until the end of December 2015. A new principal joined the school in January.

## **Main findings**

Following the section 5 inspection in July and disappointing examination results in August, there was a change to the leadership of the school. After the departure of the principal, the interim principal acted swiftly to stabilise the school and raise staff morale. She rapidly identified and prioritised the improvements needed. This clarity of vision made an immediate impact. Teams of leaders, teachers and other staff were reorganised to enable much more effective communication. This led to a greater sense of common purpose, with the progress and well-being of all pupils at the heart of the shared vision. Steps taken by the interim principal and leadership team have significantly improved the culture within the school. Pupils and staff are clearly enjoying working within the collaborative ethos which now pervades the school. During my visits to classrooms the atmosphere was purposeful and pupils were appropriately involved in a range of activities. It was clear that the pupils knew what was expected of them during the lessons. No low-level disruption was observed.

Since the inspection, leaders rightly concentrated on improving the quality of teaching and learning. In September, lessons were lengthened to one hour to allow more time for deeper thinking and extended writing. Precise targets set for pupils are helping them focus on skills they need to improve. Pupils are expected to complete homework regularly and this is checked closely. Questioning by teachers increasingly challenges and extends pupils' understanding. Teachers are now more accountable for pupils' progress, including disadvantaged pupils. Where weaknesses in teaching are identified, well-targeted coaching takes place, including by your outstanding practitioners. This is helping teachers to develop their skills and teaching in the school is improving.

Systems have been introduced to improve the way pupils' progress is tracked. Teachers are using this information to plan the next steps to raise achievement. Where pupils are identified as falling behind, steps are taken to help them catch up. When planning lessons, teachers carefully check what pupils can already do and then devise learning tasks to improve particular skills. Since the work is closely matched to their starting points, pupils approach the tasks with more confidence and enthusiasm.

Provision for pupils who need additional support has improved. A learning and achievement centre has been established, with a curriculum closely matched to pupils' needs. A number of pupils who have been absent from school have been

successfully reintegrated. The inclusion team has been reorganised and located together to provide a more joined-up response to pupils who are vulnerable to underachievement. This includes innovations such as a 'sensory room', which provides a calm environment. One pupil explained how valuable she finds this room to help her manage her emotions and learn well. These actions, along with a more rapid response to pupil absence by pastoral staff, are helping to improve attendance. However, school leaders and directors (governors) are aware that more needs to be done to meet average national levels of attendance.

The drive to improve literacy throughout the school is showing signs of impact. Feedback by teachers in pupils' books generally follows the school's policy by emphasising the importance of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Following some useful partnership work with staff from a primary school within the federation, the school has joined the National Handwriting Association.

Leaders at the school show resilience and a determined drive for further improvement. Senior and middle leaders I met were well motivated, demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and recognised that further improvements in pupils' achievement are necessary. In particular, the need to raise GCSE results is an immediate priority. Staff at the school were not expecting the drop in results in August 2015. School leaders responded by conducting an analysis to identify why grades were lower than predicted. Based on these findings, leaders planned a series of actions to address the weaknesses. One change is to increase the proportion of pupils who sit the higher tier examination papers in mathematics. This example illustrates the higher expectations of pupils evident throughout the school.

School leaders have strengthened processes to improve the accuracy of levels and grades given by teachers, so that assessment information is reliable. Moderation of work is now more robust and you are drawing on expertise from other schools to check teachers' marking of mock examination papers. Your latest progress data shows that the current Year 11 are on course to make better progress than last year's cohort.

In response to the inspection in July and this summer's low GCSE results, leaders and directors devised a new school improvement plan. The plan focuses on a limited number of priorities with clear targets for improvement. However, arrangements for monitoring actions and evaluating their impact are not precise enough. Steps do not always have measurable milestones along the way. The plan would be more robust if it clarified which people are responsible for monitoring the implementation of actions and who is evaluating their impact. This makes it easier for directors to judge how successfully leaders are improving teaching and raising standards.

Following the inspection, a review of governance took place. This considered the roles of the Federation Board of Directors and the Astor College Advisory Board. As a result, the Advisory Board plays a closer role in monitoring the school and more

streamlined information passes onto the Federation Board. Board members now offer more focused challenge to school leaders. They have a clear expectation that you, as newly appointed principal, will maintain the momentum of improvement achieved since the inspection. You have already identified some adjustments to help raise pupils' achievement further. You should be able to build on the strong relationships within the school and across the federation which have been key to driving improvement during the last few months.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

### **External support**

Staff at Astor College have been effectively supported by colleagues at the Duke of York's Royal Military School. One example is the collaborative work between the mathematics departments, which has raised expectations of pupils at Astor College.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Board of Directors and the Director of Children's Services for Kent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**