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13 April 2016

Mr Simon Knight  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Knight

### **Short inspection of The Helena Romanes School and Sixth Form Centre**

Following my visit to the school on 10 March 2016 with Katrina Lambert, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the predecessor school was judged to be good in November 2012.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

This is a good school. It slipped in effectiveness following the previous inspection but, as a highly visible and approachable headteacher, you have ensured that the school is now improving quickly. The school is a happy place where most pupils enjoy their learning. Teaching is enthusiastic and engaging. Governors and senior leaders are ambitious for the school and its pupils. Governors are well informed and have a good understanding of what the school has needed to do to meet the needs of all its pupils.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is very positive. Pupils are polite. They told inspectors of their gratitude for the extra time and effort that staff give them. You offer a wide range of catch-up sessions for pupils and extra-curricular clubs which are well supported. You have arranged transport for disadvantaged pupils to attend these activities. Most staff, pupils, parents and carers are proud of the school. Several parents commented positively on how you and your staff, including the office staff, are 'quick to respond' and are 'helpful'.

You acknowledge that difficulties in recruiting and retaining effective teachers of mathematics has contributed to the school's temporary dip in performance following the previous inspection. The lack of consistent high-quality, subject specialist staffing in mathematics is also the main concern expressed by parents. You rightly

acknowledge that, despite your best efforts to mitigate the problem, there remains a challenge regarding consistency in staffing in mathematics. There was a sharp improvement in results in 2015, but progress in mathematics is similar to the national average whereas progress in English is much stronger.

Last year's visit from Her Majesty's Inspectors reporting on the progress of disadvantaged pupils asked you to 'ensure that the progress of disadvantaged pupils is monitored and evaluated as part of the drive to improve the achievement of all groups'. You have acted on this and disadvantaged pupils are now identified in staff planning and good support is given.

Your previous inspection report asked you to improve the quality of teaching and improve the leadership of teaching. You have done both. You are rightly focusing on improving the typical quality of teaching from good to being even better, with a particular emphasis on providing challenge for all pupils including the most able. There is still a minority of boys who do not always participate fully. A few teachers do too little to help them focus and move forward with their learning. Your records of the quality of teaching show that you have been successful in eradicating ineffective teaching and that most teaching helps pupils make good progress.

Pupils are generally enthusiastic learners who want to do well. You have recently introduced a new marking policy. Most marking is regular and follows this whole-school policy. Pupils are very clear that marking gives them effective guidance on how to do better. The overwhelming majority say that teachers help them to do their best. However, the marking policy is sometimes not rigorously applied across all subjects.

Governors have rightly challenged the effectiveness of the sixth form and as a result you have taken successful action to improve it. This is having an extremely positive impact, with the progress of learners on traditional A levels catching up with the excellent progress of learners following vocational subjects. The improved quality assurance arrangements and progress checking found in Years 7 to 11 are now present in the sixth form. Middle leaders are clearer that the progress of learners in the sixth form is their responsibility and they are held to account by sixth form leaders.

While generally very positive about the school, some older pupils feel that the school does too little to prepare them for the adult world, including the world of work. Some work experience opportunities are offered in the sixth form and a business challenge for all other sixth formers develops their enterprise skills. Although Year 11 pupils have an independent careers interview and say this gives them information about colleges and apprenticeships, there is no opportunity for work experience below the sixth form. Pupils lament the lack of personal finance education.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The school's safeguarding policies and procedures meet requirements. The single central record is fully in place and implemented effectively with some aspects that are

especially well developed. Leaders and governors ensure that staff are well informed about new guidance including, for example, the 'Prevent' duty. Staff and governors receive regular training. One member of the governing body is a serving police officer and her professional knowledge and expertise are used well to add rigour to governors' monitoring of the school's safeguarding arrangements. Governors ensure that information on the school's website is compliant.

Pupils, parents and carers feel that safety is well managed and is supported by clear rules and responsibilities, good relationships and positive behaviour. Almost all parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, reported that their child was safe and happy and that the school was effective in dealing with bullying. A good range of external presenters is used to teach pupils about aspects of personal safety. The school should consider whether the approach to personal, social, health and economic education in Key Stage 4 adequately ensures that each pupil develops the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary for their future well-being.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development. Senior leaders are taking effective action to improve the school.
- A new marking system has been implemented across all curriculum areas, which has helped pupils to make progress more rapidly. There are, however, pockets of inconsistency where teachers do not yet follow the policy or do not mark pupils' work regularly.
- Since the previous inspection the school has worked hard and with a good deal of success to improve overall attendance. The gap in attendance rates between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is closing but the gap is not closing quickly enough in Years 8 and 10. New systems were introduced in September 2015 to track attendance more effectively. These are not yet precise enough in helping to target interventions for improving the attendance of key groups of pupils, particularly those with special educational needs or disability and disadvantaged pupils.
- Last year the school received a visit from Her Majesty's Inspectors to evaluate the school's work to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and others. The school has followed the recommendations, but there was not time to see the impact in last summer's results. Internal assessment information demonstrates that the progress of disadvantaged pupils is improving.
- Overall, the summer 2015 results and measures of pupil progress showed a marked improvement on previous years.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is clear in many ways. Assemblies highlight British values. Religious education has a high priority and as a result pupils develop a tolerance of people from different backgrounds.
- There is strong evidence of a positive transformation in the sixth form. Measures of learners' progress show that for A-level subjects learners' progress was stronger in 2015 than in previous years. The progress of current learners

shows continual improvement in A-level subjects and is now above average. Learners on vocational courses continue to make excellent progress and attain highly.

- The perception of the sixth form among potential learners and the community has improved leading to growing numbers of learners in the sixth form.
- Learners are well supported in the sixth form and their progress is now monitored closely. Subject departments have extended the increased rigour of Key Stage 4 support and challenge to the sixth form.
- Beyond their chosen subjects, there is a good variety of enrichment activities available to sixth formers. There are opportunities to undertake work placements, which about half of learners take. For the rest, participation in the business challenge provides useful enterprise learning. This goes some way to addressing the requirement for personalised programmes that include work-related learning, but more work is needed to fully address the work-related aspects of the 16 to 19 study programmes.
- In Key Stage 4, pupils do well on vocational courses. The careers advice is valued by pupils, and most Year 11 pupils and sixth formers believe that the transition from Year 11 to the sixth form is well supported, with effective guidance to help them choose the right course at the right post-16 provider. Pupils in Key Stage 4 and learners in the sixth form are provided with information and understanding about apprenticeships, although few take up this option.
- The school seeks and acts upon external support. It recently took part in a peer assessment and support exercise known as 'Essex triads'. This involved leaders openly and honestly sharing information on the school and being visited by headteachers and senior leaders from two other Essex schools. The visit took place before last summer's results were known. The report noted that 'the school has experienced a drop in results recently, but has accurately identified the areas to develop' and 'has started to implement strategies to bring about improvement'. Last summer's results confirmed the findings that the school was 'well on the way to reversing the trend'. Evidence from this inspection and the school's internal information on pupils' progress shows that the impact of improvements is gaining momentum and increasing.
- Pupils' behaviour is commendable. Pupils move around the school in a calm, orderly and purposeful manner and show mutual respect for their peers and adults. They are welcoming and friendly and proud of their school. They are very clear about expectations of behaviour and explain sanctions that are enforced if pupils do not meet these high standards. The rewards policy is effective and pupils excitedly explain the benefits of working hard and making good progress.
- Pupils are enthusiastic about the opportunities the school offers them in terms of extra-curricular opportunities. Incidents of bullying or poor behaviour are rare. The student manager team offer targeted support designed to meet the needs of all pupils.

## **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the system for tracking attendance is more rigorous in analysing the attendance of different groups
- there is even greater consistency in teachers' use of the new marking and assessment policy
- the work-related elements of the post-16 study programmes are implemented fully.

Yours sincerely

**Adrian Lyons**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

The inspection was carried out on one day by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Ofsted Inspector. They scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection. They held meetings with school leaders, representatives of the governing body, middle leaders, staff and groups of pupils from Years 9, 11 and the sixth form. Inspectors spoke to pupils informally around the school and observed them in classes and around the school at lesson change time and in breaks. Inspectors considered the 87 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), 114 responses to the pupil questionnaire, 80 free text messages and 85 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.