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Mr Paul Spencer-Ellis
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Dear Mr Spencer-Ellis

Short inspection of Royal Alexandra and Albert School

Following my visit to the school on 21 April 2016 with Jon Whitcombe, 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 school was judged to be good in September 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have successfully built a leadership team around you that works together to improve the school effectively. There is a culture of high expectations and aspiration that set the tone for achievement among pupils.

Pupils speak highly of their experiences at the school and are proud to be members of this unique community. They rightly believe they are well supported because pastoral care is delivered with their individual needs in mind. There is a strong sense of community and so pupils say they feel safe and know whom they can talk to if they are worried or concerned. You and other leaders undertake a range of useful activities to find out what pupils think. You use this information to make well-considered changes to provision. However, you do not always look closely enough at the difference your actions make to pupils' outcomes.

The school's range of subjects and experiences (the curriculum) are exciting and so pupils are highly engaged and work hard in lessons. There is a strong emphasis on their achievement and preparation for life in modern Britain. Pupils make good progress and leave the school having reached standards that are above those expected nationally.

At the last inspection, inspectors identified the need to establish greater consistency of teaching across key stages 2 and 3 to improve how the achievement of different groups is monitored. Leaders were also asked to ensure that planning, marking and curriculum development match the stronger practice seen in key stages 4 and 5.

Leaders have tackled these areas effectively, so that:

- there is now much greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning, best demonstrated by the improvements in key stage 2
- strategies to track the progress of pupils by teachers are stronger and used effectively for planning, so pupils are achieving more and leaving with results that are better than typical for their ages
- the tracking and monitoring of the progress of groups of pupils are accurate
- the quality of feedback to pupils about their work is very effective and consistent across the school
- pupils make good use of the feedback they are given to improve their work and deepen their understanding about what they are learning
- the curriculum meets the needs of all groups of pupils more suitably.

There is now much better use of assessment information by leaders and teachers to monitor school effectiveness and pupils' progress. This means that you and the staff are much clearer about the school's strengths and weaknesses. Equally, you know which pupils are making the progress you want and where extra attention is needed. However, you now need to ensure that you use this information to review the impact of what you and other leaders have introduced more effectively. For example, you reacted to a widening gap between outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and their peers in 2015 by changing how provision for disadvantaged pupils was led and managed. Although this led to an improvement, you have not analysed the impact of such initiatives sharply enough in order to evaluate the difference they are making and identify what could be even better.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and recent improvements have helped strengthen them further. The deputy headteacher of pastoral and boarding, who has responsibility for safeguarding, joined in September 2015. In January 2016, he took on the overall role of designated safeguarding lead. He has already successfully built stronger relationships with other agencies that safeguard pupils, such as the local authority safeguarding team. Leaders have reviewed the way they record information and have implemented improvements. Records are robust and acted on. Referrals are made appropriately and as necessary. Leaders take advice seriously and make sure that internal investigations are thorough.

The new deputy headteacher has focused on ensuring that staff have completed training, including on the 'Prevent' duty. The two deputy headteachers of pastoral and curriculum are rightly further aligning their work to ensure that school procedures are consistently implemented by all care and education staff. Staff are clear about what to do should they have concerns. However, there are not enough opportunities within the curriculum to help pupils explore a broad enough range of safeguarding issues for themselves, for example relating to e-safety.

Inspection findings

- You have developed a culture of high aspiration and success. Staff are keenly focused on doing what is needed to improve outcomes for pupils. Under the scrutiny of the deputy headteacher who has responsibility for teaching and learning, school leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of the school well. This helps ensure that plans for improvement are focused sharply on the issues. Consequently, the school is continually improving.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have taken effective action to improve provision. For example, staff now make consistent use of assessment information to provide useful feedback for pupils in order to help them make progress.
- You and other leaders work very well together to review and evaluate how well the school is doing in a wide range of areas. This includes observing teaching and giving teachers useful feedback about how they can improve their practice. Although leaders undertake a useful range of activities and know their school well, they do not review the difference their work is making to pupils' outcomes well enough.
- Governors hold leaders to account effectively. They make good use of reports provided by a school improvement adviser from Babcock 4s (the company that provides school improvement services for the local authority). For example, they have asked pertinent questions of leaders in response to points made by the adviser about the science department. They are highly ambitious for pupils. Governors equally know where there are strengths and weaknesses because leaders provide them with useful information. They use this information well to challenge leaders, successfully raising expectations of what leaders expect of pupils.
- Leaders have put training and development of staff at the core of the school's plan to raise standards. Strategies such as the 'outstanding teacher initiative' are used successfully to allow staff to share good practice. This, alongside leaders' robust management of teachers' performance, has helped to improve the quality of teaching since the last inspection. Although there is already greater consistency, there is still more to do to ensure that key stage 3 is as effective as other parts of the school.
- Teaching in key stage 2 is now much more effective. Staff plan lessons that interest and enthuse pupils. Through improved use of assessment information, implemented with the support of leaders, teachers now plan lessons that take into account what pupils need to learn in order to build on what they already know. Pupils of different abilities are catered for well. Consequently, they make good and sometimes better progress. This was demonstrated exceptionally well in a key stage 2 lesson about multiplying and dividing fractions. The teacher used questions to great effect to challenge pupils to think more deeply and explain their ideas to their peers. This ensured that pupils mastered concepts well by applying what they had already learned to solve complex problems.

- Pupils behave very well in and around the school. Positive relationships help to engender a strong sense of community. There are clear rules for pupils and they respond very well to them. Pupils conduct themselves with care and courtesy when moving around the school. They show very good attitudes to learning and take pride in the presentation and quality of their work.
- There are exceptionally well-developed systems for recording and reviewing behaviour on the rare occasions when there are issues. Leaders have used this information well to reverse the trend of increased exclusions.
- Pupils often leave the school having achieved results that are much higher than typical. For the last three years, the progress pupils make between key stage 2 and key stage 4 has steadily improved. Consequently, the proportion of pupils achieving 5 A* to C grades in their GCSEs, including in English and mathematics, at the end of key stage 4 is consistently above the national average and improving. Pupils are very well prepared for their next stage of learning because of the standards they achieve and the useful guidance they receive. Those who go on to study in the sixth form often do very well as a result. The progress made by those who go on to do vocational courses is particularly strong.
- The sixth form continues to be very effective. The appointment of a new leader since the last inspection has helped this provision go from strength to strength. The leader accurately identifies areas of strength or areas for improvement, and takes effective action to bring change. Consequently, 16 to 19 study programmes meet the needs of learners exceptionally well. All groups of learners are well supported because their progress is tracked carefully and interventions are provided when necessary to boost progress. Pastoral care and guidance are equally as strong as for pupils in other parts of the school. Leaders have rightly identified that some teachers could still secure better progress over time. This has led to a greater focus on teachers' subject knowledge when teaching at sixth-form level.
- Groups of pupils often do as well as each other in terms of progress from their starting points. Leaders have rightly identified the most able pupils as a group that could do better still. Consequently, they are taking steps to ensure that the curriculum, as well as individual learning activities, provides enough challenge for these pupils. Those who have special educational needs or disability, or who attained previous results that were lower than typical often make exceptional progress from their starting points. The context of the school is unique and so cohorts differ widely from each other. More pupils leave or join other than at normal times than in most schools. This means that, at times, the performance of groups can differ widely.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- their analysis of information collected when monitoring the school is more sharply focused on pupils' outcomes
- they continue to strengthen the consistency of teaching and learning, particularly in key stage 3

- the curriculum provides opportunities for pupils to learn more about keeping safe in a wider range of situations.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the head of school effectiveness at Babcock 4S and the director of children's services for Surrey. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Barnes
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

This inspection was aligned with an inspection of boarding provision, for which there is a separate report. The welfare part of the inspection was unannounced with inspectors arriving in the afternoon preceding the school inspection. Inspectors met with you, senior leaders, the head of juniors, the head of the sixth form, two members of the governing body and a group of pupils. Together with social care regulatory inspectors, inspectors met with those who have responsibility for safeguarding pupils. Inspectors visited a number of classes, in most cases accompanied by a member of the leadership team, to observe teaching and look at pupils' work. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour in and around the school, including when using the dining hall. They met with leaders who have responsibility for managing behaviour and scrutinised their systems for monitoring behaviour over time. They considered the responses of 71 parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors analysed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, information about pupils' progress, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures.