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Jonathan Smith
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Dear Mr Smith

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Ardley Hill Academy

Following my visit to your school on 11 October 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 March 2016. 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that future planning for early years provision takes into account progression in learning across the pre-school and Reception classes
- improve provision for pupils' transition from Reception into Year 1
- address inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning across the school
- ensure that all of the evidence gathered from monitoring activities is evaluated thoroughly and documented.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, the chair and two other governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. Self-evaluation of the school's performance was checked, together with records of monitoring of teaching and learning. The latest information about pupils' progress and attainment was scrutinised. I met with the lead teachers for English and mathematics and the school's improvement adviser. I visited all classes briefly with you and the deputy headteacher. We looked at a small sample of pupils' written work in a range of subjects.

Context

Numbers of pupils have continued to rise since the last inspection. There are now two Year 6 classes and new specialist provision for up to eight pupils with autism spectrum disorder. Pre-school provision has changed to accommodate an increase in the number of two-year-olds. Two-year-olds and three-year olds are now learning in separate classes. Five new teachers joined the school in September. They replaced two teachers that left last term and filled new posts resulting from the school's expansion. The leadership team has been reorganised. The assistant headteacher has taken over the role of special needs coordinator. The early years leader and leaders of key stage 1 and lower key stage 2 are new to the roles. The upper key stage 2 leader has taken on additional responsibility as the designated lead for safeguarding. Subject leaders for English and mathematics are both new. The chair of the governing body has changed since the previous inspection.

During the summer term, a storm seriously flooded the building, resulting in its closure for many weeks. Staff and pupils moved into temporary accommodation nearby while extensive building works and refurbishment were completed.

Main findings

The leadership team, staff and governors are addressing areas for improvement raised at the last inspection resolutely and with a shared sense of urgency. You and the deputy headteacher communicate your vision for the school well and you know what needs to be done to tackle weaknesses. Your ambition to improve pupils' academic achievement comes across strongly, especially for disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils. The school's improvement plan is a useful tool to bring about rapid change. It is clear and succinct and actions are closely aligned to pupils' achievement. Rightly, the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils is prioritised. Governors have ensured that progress towards the actions in the plan is checked at key review points to avoid any slippage in completing them.

New leaders understand their roles and responsibilities well. They are pressing on with the planned actions determinedly, with some promising early results. For

example, weaknesses in the early years identified in the previous inspection are improving rapidly. The new leader is ensuring that children have access to a broad range of challenging and stimulating activities enabling them to make choices, gain independence and learn from each other. Time has not allowed for the leader to influence provision across all of the early years classes and ensure consistency in quality and progression in learning. The new lead for English has already undertaken a review of writing across the school and has given clear and direct feedback to staff identifying where improvements are needed. Senior and middle leaders effectively check the quality of teaching and learning in a range of subjects to find out what is working well. However, this valuable work is not recorded well enough to provide unequivocal evidence of what the school has achieved thus far, how it knows what has been achieved and what it is going to do next.

Most classrooms are well equipped, inviting spaces for learning – some are exemplary. Teachers have higher expectations for what pupils are capable of achieving. The quality of teaching and learning is improving but it is still uneven across some year groups, classes and subjects. The school's information about pupils' learning shows inconsistencies in the progress that pupils in different classes are making, and examination of written work in pupils' books confirms this.

Importantly, you have ensured that assessment of pupils' learning is accurate and robust. The progress of all groups, including disadvantaged pupils, the most able pupils and most-able disadvantaged pupils, is being tracked carefully. Advisers, consultants and staff in other schools have checked that your assessments are accurate. This means that, at the start of this school year, teachers have a clear picture of what pupils already understand and know to inform future plans for their learning. Year 6 pupils' starting points are much higher than last year. You have set ambitious targets for them and, as seen in the work in their exercise books, pupils have made a positive start towards achieving the results of which they are capable in reading, writing and mathematics. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. In addition, all teachers are now ensuring that pupils have regular opportunities to write at length across a range of subjects. Some particularly good examples were seen in science and history. Teaching in Year 1 does not take into account sufficiently the learning needs of pupils transferring from the early years curriculum to the national curriculum. Pupils are not accessing similar activities that they were familiar with in Reception while more formal ways of working are introduced.

Senior leaders and governors have identified reasons why the spending of pupil premium funding for disadvantaged pupils has not made the intended difference to their learning. Importantly, you are taking swift action to address this. For example, a teacher has been employed specifically to work with disadvantaged children and the most able children in the Reception classes to accelerate their progress. In addition, because a significant proportion of the funding was invested in employing teaching assistants to work with disadvantaged pupils, you have clarified what their roles and responsibilities are. The assistant headteacher now oversees their work,

providing training to improve their skills in promoting good learning, alongside regular appraisal of their performance.

Governors are resilient. They have responded positively to the previous inspection and are making sure that they are better informed about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The committee structure has been revised, and training, especially on how to interpret information about pupils' achievement, has been arranged. Governors are placing themselves in a stronger position to challenge school leaders. They are asking for specific information and making visits to the school to enable them to form an independent view of its work.

External support

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium is imminent. Governors took immediate action to address development points arising from a recent external review of governance. The list of work to do is long but the will to improve is very strong. The school works well with other schools in the area in order to share best practice. Leaders and governors do not hesitate to seek advice from professionals external to the school, such as the improvement adviser, to support them in the drive for improvement. Importantly, they respond to advice and guidance from external sources positively and quickly.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector