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Mr Barry Blakelock
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Blakelock

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Rye Studio School

Following my visit to your school on 14 November 2017, 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 November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and members of the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- prepare students better for the next stage in their education or career, both personally and academically
- improve teaching and learning, particularly in questioning and raising expectations of what students can achieve, especially for those who are most able
- improve students' attendance and reduce rates of persistent or casual absence.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, senior leaders, the chief executive of the Rye Academy Trust, the attendance officer, trustees and with a group of students, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Plans to

improve the school were reviewed and evaluated. Her Majesty's Inspector observed teaching and learning in all classes and several subjects, including mathematics, creative writing, creative media, science, music, performing arts and photography. Information about students' current attendance and rates of persistent absence was scrutinised, as was information about students' current progress and attainment. Her Majesty's Inspector also reviewed the school's recent work to monitor the quality of teaching.

Context

Since the last inspection, there have been a number of major changes to leadership and provision in the school. In September 2016, the current chief executive officer of the academy trust was appointed and carried out a full review of the performance of the whole trust, including Rye Studio School, neighbouring Rye College and Rye Community Primary School. The local governing board resigned. A new chair was appointed to preside over a single board of trustees, overseeing the whole academy trust provision. The previous senior leadership team also left the school, together with a number of teaching and support staff. From September 2017, a seconded headteacher from another academy trust was appointed to lead the studio school and Rye College. Other senior leaders have been seconded to support leadership across both schools. The current leader for key stage 5 has stepped up to take on leadership of the quality of teaching and learning. An attendance officer was appointed at the beginning of the autumn term, to oversee attendance at both the studio school and Rye College.

The new board of trustees made the decision to close Rye Studio School and merge the site with Rye College, as from September 2018. No students have been admitted into Year 10 or Year 12 this academic year. There are fewer students on the studio school roll than there were at the time of the last inspection, with only students in Year 11 and Year 13 completing courses this year. Owing to financial constraints and low student take-up, some courses in the studio school have ceased to operate. Some students attend courses at the Rye College site and are taught by Rye College teachers. At the time of this inspection, the Rye Academy Trust was seeking a new academy trust to take over the running of the whole provision.

Main findings

Staff and students have been through a difficult time in the studio school since the last inspection. Initially, actions to improve it were too slow. Constraints around recruitment, changes in leadership and financial restrictions led to delays in key improvements that were beyond the control of the current senior team. On their appointment, in September 2017, the new leaders responded swiftly to the areas identified for improvement at the last inspection. They rightly focused on the most urgent shortfalls. As a result, students are safer and their attendance has increased. Teaching is beginning to improve and students are making more progress, especially in mathematics.

Leaders are reflective, constantly review the impact of their actions and are receptive to guidance. They are astute and know how much the whole trust needs to improve. Trust leaders thoroughly reviewed the performance of the studio school, and took decisive action to restructure leadership and streamline the curriculum. Trust and school leaders have had to work within budgetary constraints, but have also carefully considered the wider implications for the local community.

New leaders have, understandably, focused on ensuring that students in the studio school are safeguarded. At the beginning of the term, leaders identified some poor practice around the ways in which students were registered and their attendance tracked. The whole system for registering students has now been completely tightened up. An attendance officer, supported by senior leaders, follows up non-attendance rigorously. Registers are completed lesson by lesson. Expectations of students' attendance are higher. Firm action has been taken with individuals whose absence is causing concern, including the issuing of penalty notices to families. Leaders now know where the poor attenders are and are able to safeguard them more effectively, particularly if these students have additional vulnerabilities. Leaders can point to the attendance of several individual students that has improved following some direct intervention.

Nevertheless, attendance figures are still too low and are below national averages. There is a lingering culture of casual absence within the studio school and leaders are wise to keep on top of this. In addition, a few students are not fully clear about the new systems and procedures for signing in, if they are late for school. These students are taking time to get used to the raised expectations.

Senior leaders rightly identified that they needed to ensure that Year 11 students were getting a better deal in their core subjects, particularly mathematics. Sensible changes to students' timetables and better specialist teaching have led to improvements. Students are now being prepared more effectively for their GCSE examinations. They report that they feel more challenged and are aiming for higher grades, in line with their prior attainment. Teachers have identified and begun to tackle the specific gaps in students' learning in mathematics. However, for some students, their mathematical reasoning is still underdeveloped. Initial reviews of students' progress in mathematics indicate that they are achieving more. However, there are still not enough students building upon their natural ability and prior attainment.

It is too early to evaluate the full impact of senior leaders' improvements to teaching and learning in other subjects. Leaders are still at the stage of identifying exactly where the shortfalls are. They have mostly focused on whether teachers are meeting leaders' raised expectations, rather than their impact on students' progress. Her Majesty's Inspector agreed with senior leaders' assessment that the most able students are not challenged enough, even in subject areas where attainment has historically been stronger. Teachers' questioning is beginning to improve and, where this is effective, students are prompted to think more deeply, recall previous

knowledge and respond more precisely. However, the quality of questioning is not consistently probing or thought provoking, which places a ceiling on the most able students' achievement.

Students' welfare continues to be nurtured well and they value the support they receive. While personal coaching supports students with their vulnerabilities, there have been some unintended consequences. Some students are not sufficiently outward looking or as resilient as they should be for their age. Many know that they need to make more progress and catch up, but are too easily cast down by criticism. Students in Year 11 told Her Majesty's Inspector that they felt 'unwanted' and did not fit in when attending lessons at Rye College. These students do not fully understand why new arrangements have been made or how to manage change themselves. In short, some younger students have not been prepared as well as they should be for further education or employment.

The new board of trustees possess a clear understanding of its accountabilities and members are experienced in governance. Trustees are wisely developing a view of the provision as a whole and are planning a long-term strategy to improve the performance of the trust. However, it is very early days in the new board's tenure. Trustees rightly realise that they must champion the remaining students in the studio school and hold leaders to account for their progress and destinations.

External support

Leaders benefit from a strong partnership with a local school catering for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. In addition, the trust has commissioned two reviews since September 2017, carried out by a consultant headteacher. His findings were clearly helpful in providing evidence of what needed to improve and what the urgent priorities were. His local knowledge and experience have helped to support the new leadership team and trustees. East Sussex local authority has provided useful support and guidance with the school's work to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence.

I am copying this letter to the chief executive officer of the Rye Academy Trust, the chair of trustees, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector