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Mr Lee Kane
Principal
Astor College (A Specialist College for the Arts)
Astor Avenue
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Dear Mr Kane

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Astor College (A Specialist College for the Arts)

Following my visit to your school on 13 November 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in September 2017, the school was also judged to require improvement.

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

The academy should take further action to:

- ensure that all pupils make sustained progress in their learning, in particular most-able disadvantaged boys.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and members of your senior and middle leadership teams to discuss the impact of actions taken since the previous inspection. I also met with the senior executive leader, the chair of the academy board and the chair of trustees. I interviewed a group of pupils about their views of

the school and, alongside senior leaders, scrutinised a sample of their work. Accompanied by you and the vice-principal, I carried out a learning walk to observe learning in key stages 3 and 4. I also reviewed documents that you made available to me, including your self-evaluation and your school development plan. In addition, I reviewed the school's arrangements for checking that all staff and volunteers were suitable to work with children and young people.

Context

There have been significant changes in governance since the previous inspection. The founding chief executive officer retired in August 2018 and a senior executive leader was appointed. In addition, trustees are in the process of agreeing changes to the scheme of delegation, with the aim of devolving more powers to the academy board.

Main findings

Aided by your senior team, you have wasted no time in addressing the priorities identified at the previous inspection. Your resolute commitment to ensuring the best possible outcomes for some of the region's most vulnerable pupils is shared by all staff. The school is warm and welcoming, providing a safe and nurturing environment in which pupils do increasingly well.

You and your senior team have rightly identified the need to ensure that teachers have access to the best possible training as a key part of your improvement plan. Since the previous inspection, you have forged a fruitful partnership with a designated research school in the region. This partnership has given teachers access to the most up-to-date research into the curriculum, teaching and how pupils learn. As a result, there is greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers enjoy sharing their ideas with each other and carrying out their own research into what works for the pupils of Astor College. Staff across the school have developed new approaches to curriculum planning, questioning and assessment in order to ensure greater levels of challenge and more accurate tracking of pupils' progress. For example, teachers now seize opportunities to extend pupils' subject-specific vocabulary and check that they can use it accurately. In addition, teachers ask increasingly searching questions that probe pupils' understanding and require them to explain their thinking.

You and your leadership team have sensibly asked teachers to focus in particular on improving pupils' literacy skills and on their ability to retrieve and recall what they have learned. Pupils confirm that they know how to improve their work because teachers give them clear feedback and also allow them time in lessons to act on the feedback. Pupils also say that homework, which is set regularly, helps them to remember what they have studied in class. As a result of the improvements in teaching, most pupils now work hard in class, take pride in their work and are ambitious for their futures.

At the time of the previous inspection, many subject leaders were new to post. They are now established in their roles and lead their areas with confidence. They have an accurate understanding of the school's priorities and can point to the impact of their work on both the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. They have a strong commitment to the values of the school and feel that they are well supported by their line managers.

Senior leaders have ensured that systems for tracking pupils' progress are followed consistently and that arrangements are in place for the external checking of teachers' assessments. Consequently, assessment is accurate, and this has enabled subject leaders to put in place the correct in-class and out-of-class interventions to support further pupils who may be falling behind.

Attendance is improving steadily. In 2017/18, overall attendance was higher than the previous year, but remained a little below the national average for secondary schools. Currently, overall attendance since September is higher than it was over the same period last year. Leaders responsible for this area of the school's work have had particular success in improving the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who speak English as an additional language. This is because leaders have invested time and energy into building strong relationships with parents and maintaining close links with other agencies that provide support to families. Also, recent improvements in teaching have meant that pupils are now more enthusiastic about their learning and so come to school more regularly.

Provisional results for 2018 suggest that pupils' overall progress at key stage 4 was broadly similar to the previous year, when it was below average. However, pupils who speak English as an additional language did particularly well, making very strong progress from their starting points. In addition, there was a sharp rise in the proportion of pupils achieving a good pass in GCSE English and mathematics combined. Across the school, sharper systems and improvements in the quality of teaching are enabling all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, to make stronger progress in their learning than in previous years.

Pupils are supported well to choose and move on to appropriate next steps in education and training. You also make effective use of the school's specialism to broaden pupils' cultural horizons and ignite in them a passion for creative and performing arts.

You have correctly identified that the most able pupils, including most-able disadvantaged boys, continue to underachieve. You have put in place credible plans to ensure that this group of pupils does not slip further behind.

Governors have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Their development plan for the school is fit for purpose. They hold you and other leaders stringently to account for the impact of your actions and in particular for the impact

of additional funding on the progress of disadvantaged pupils and those in Year 7 who need to catch up.

External support

You draw well on carefully chosen support to ensure that the quality of teaching, pupils' progress and attendance continue to improve. Staff value the partnership with Durrington Research School, as well as the collaboration with a national charity that supports teachers' professional development. Your staff have also benefited from working alongside leaders and teachers in other trust schools, as well as with colleagues in the local maths hub. Staff with responsibility for pupils' welfare enjoy strong relationships with local multi-agency teams.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the academy board, the chair of trustees, the senior executive leader of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Kent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gary Holden
Her Majesty's Inspector