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Mr Andrew Keen
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Dear Mr Keen

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Holly Lodge Girls' College

Following my visit to your school on 10 January 2019, 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.

Senior leaders and governors 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 school should take further action to:

- continue to improve outcomes for pupils, especially in science, by ensuring that teachers address the gaps in pupils' learning, particularly for pupils in key stage 4
- build on the improvements secured in the quality of teaching in academic subjects in the sixth form, so that teaching is consistently good across subject areas
- sustain and improve the progress made by disadvantaged pupils at key stage 4, particularly in English and mathematics.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, two deputy headteachers and other senior leaders, including the senior leader with responsibility for the sixth form. A learning walk was undertaken with you and the deputy headteacher, and pupils' work was scrutinised during this activity. A range of documentation relating to school improvement was also considered. A meeting was held with a representative from the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school action plans were evaluated. The lead inspector met with a group of pupils, a group of staff and two members of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body.

Context

Since the previous inspection, leaders and governors have made changes to leadership, particularly at middle leadership level. There have also been changes to staffing. At senior leadership level, a new coordinator of the provision for pupils with special educational needs has been appointed. Three new middle leaders have been appointed. These are: a head of mathematics, a head of physical education and a head of creative arts. There have also been several new teacher appointments in a range of different subject areas. This is especially the case in science, where leaders have taken steps to recruit five new science teachers. This accounts for half of the department. The leadership of the science department has also been restructured. In total, since the last inspection, 19 teachers have left the school.

Main findings

The school is on a journey of improvement. Leaders at every level are passionate about raising pupils' aspirations and improving the life chances of young people in the local area. You and your leadership team are committed to improving the quality of education that the school provides. You have not shied away from tackling the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. For example, senior leaders have worked successfully to raise expectations of pupils and staff across the school. There has been a shift in the school's culture. Teachers and pupils alike embrace the school ethos: 'Expect to achieve.' Pupils are confident that the school is improving, and they appreciate the developments that leaders have made already.

Following the previous inspection, leaders have taken swift and effective action to improve the areas that inspectors identified. This includes: the quality of teaching, especially in science; outcomes for pupils; outcomes for students studying academic subjects in the sixth form; and pupils' rates of attendance. Leaders' accurate and honest self-evaluation underpins the improvements that have been made to date.

The governing body continues to raise the level of challenge it provides to you and your leadership team. Members of the governing body have a strong grasp of which

aspects of the school require further development. Governors are not over-reliant on leaders for information about the school. There is an honest and open dialogue between senior leaders and governors. This means that highly skilled and experienced governors have the information that they need to hold you to account diligently.

It is clear that the governing body provides a sufficient level of challenge to leaders. However, governors also ensure that the school continues to benefit from appropriate and relevant external support. For instance, the local authority has provided a range of support to secure improvements in outcomes for pupils and the quality of teaching. This has been particularly effective in improving the quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils in science.

You have ensured that there are effective systems to check on the quality of teaching. Leaders ensure that there is sufficient focus on increasing the level of challenge that teachers provide for pupils. Teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. This is having a positive effect on the progress that pupils make. For instance, the progress made by pupils who left the school in 2018 was considerably better than the progress made by pupils who left the year before. This was especially the case in mathematics, humanities and modern foreign languages. Provisional information shows that pupils' overall progress at key stage 4 in 2018 was in line with that of pupils nationally. There has been considerable improvement in the progress made by pupils with high starting points.

Teachers are positive about the improvements that leaders and governors have made. Teachers are especially positive about the level of challenge and support that they receive from you and your leadership team. Teachers are confident that the systems that you have introduced to check on and improve the quality of teaching are effective. For instance, teachers are keen to benefit from relevant training. They welcome the opportunity to share good practice and expertise with other teachers. They especially appreciate the opportunity to work with teachers at other local schools.

In the sixth form, ongoing improvements in the quality of teaching are securing better outcomes for students in academic subjects. For example, current students in Year 13 make good progress in biology, chemistry, English literature and mathematics. There has also been a considerable increase in the proportion of students who complete academic courses. This is because you have acted to improve the advice and guidance which pupils receive at key stage 4. Leaders ensure that students are on appropriate courses that cater best to their needs. As a result, the proportion of pupils opting to stay in the sixth form will increase next year.

You monitor carefully those aspects of the sixth form that continue to require further development. Leaders work effectively to ensure that students make good progress in academic subjects. For example, there are individual action plans for

those subjects where weaknesses in the quality of teaching remain. The assistant headteacher with overarching responsibility for the sixth form meets regularly with middle leaders. Senior leaders review how successful middle leaders' actions are in improving outcomes for students. Senior leaders hold middle leaders to account effectively. Nonetheless, there is still work to do to ensure that the quality of teaching is consistently good in some academic subjects.

Since the last inspection, the quality of teaching in science has been transformed. Leaders and governors have taken steps to strengthen the leadership of this subject area. A refreshed and energetic team of leaders in this department have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. They have gone 'back to basics' to improve the quality of teaching in their subject. For example, leaders in science have reviewed what pupils learn and the order in which different topics are covered. As a result, teachers plan learning to allow pupils to build on and develop their prior knowledge. Teachers in science benefit from appropriate training that allows them to develop and strengthen their subject knowledge, which they use to ask challenging questions of pupils and provide clear explanations. Teachers remodel their questions to address pupils' misconceptions as a matter of routine. The quality of teaching in science has come a long way in the last 18 months. The progress made by current pupils is clear in pupils' work.

Although the quality of teaching in science has improved significantly, you are under no illusion that some pupils in key stage 4 have endured a legacy of weaker teaching in key stage 3. As a result, there is still a need to continue to improve teaching by ensuring that teachers address the gaps in pupils' knowledge. This is especially the case for pupils in key stage 4.

Senior leaders acted quickly to reduce the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school. There have been considerable improvements in this area. Following the previous inspection, you have overhauled the strategies leaders use to monitor and improve pupils' attendance. Leaders' actions have been effective. Pupils and their families understand the importance of good attendance. Staff ensure that those pupils who struggle to attend school every day are given appropriate support. The proportion of pupils regularly absent from school decreased significantly during the academic year that followed the previous inspection. In fact, the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent from school during the last academic year was below the national average.

At the previous inspection, a weakness identified by inspectors was the progress made by disadvantaged pupils at key stage 4. Leaders use additional funding effectively. This is having a positive effect on the progress that this group of pupils make. For instance, leaders have secured considerable improvements in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are regularly absent from school. Furthermore, you and your leadership team ensure that disadvantaged pupils benefit from a range of pastoral support. This includes extensive work aimed at raising pupils' aspirations and removing barriers to learning.

There have also been changes in how effectively leaders monitor the progress made by this group of pupils. This means that disadvantaged pupils access appropriate help and support to catch up with their peers if they fall behind. Improvements in several areas mean that the overall progress made by disadvantaged pupils is improving. For instance, at key stage 4 the progress made by disadvantaged pupils in modern foreign languages has improved steadily for the last two years. Nonetheless, there is more to do to reduce the differences between the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally. This is especially the case in English and mathematics.

External support

Leaders and governors ensure that they take opportunities to benefit from appropriate external support. The local authority has provided a range of support. This has been particularly effective in science, mathematics and English. Leaders have also secured support from a local school to improve the quality of teaching in art.

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

Yours sincerely

Emma Gregory
Her Majesty's Inspector