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Mr P Cohen
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cohen

Short inspection of The Academy of Central Bedfordshire

Following my visit to the school on 11 July 2019 with Gary Rawlings, OI, 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 2017.

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 addressed all the issues from the previous inspections because leaders, staff, pupils and parents work as a team to improve the quality of education the school provides. For example, you have significantly reduced the use of the 'reflection room' through enhanced pastoral support. Pupils are confident to seek help if they become anxious or start to feel angry.

The local authority says that it is 'very happy' with the school and with the 'stunning outcomes' achieved by many pupils. It is working with you to secure the school's future and to ensure, in its words, that, 'This will be an outstanding provision in two years' time.'

Parents and carers are exceptionally pleased with the school. All the responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were positive. One parent said: 'ACB is an amazing school. They are all about the students and work hard to give them structure and confidence, which gives them the ability to achieve and strive.' Another parent told inspectors: 'My son has never been happier in school and looks forward to going to school every day. He feels respected and liked by all the teachers and he feels the same towards them. The pressure is off him, but he is learning and encouraged to do classes and activities he enjoys. Going to The ACB was the best thing that happened to my son because he is happy and feels part of something instead of a misfit.'

Pupils enjoy coming to school and are positive about the impact the school has had on their lives and future life chances. One pupil said: 'I like the hands-on curriculum like motor mechanics and building walls. I like the school because it's more like one-to-one and teachers don't judge you. They'll sit next to you and help you do your work.'

Governors provide robust challenge to you and the senior leadership team. Most governors are serving headteachers, and they hold you to account for how effectively you allocate funding to ensure that pupils make strong progress from their starting points. Governors are strong advocates for the school. For example, one governor has supported you in developing the trust of a community that did not want the school in their midst.

Staff describe themselves as 'a family' working together to support pupils to improve their learning and their behaviour. Another member of staff said: 'Right now, we have a really strong staff team and the kids are at the forefront of everything we do. It's a challenging place to work but very rewarding. We are giving these children life chances.' Although staff are highly committed to the school, they are not clear about your current priorities for school improvement.

You and the leadership team have effectively improved the quality of mathematics teaching across the school. However, not all staff have a strong understanding of how to deepen pupils' understanding and learning during mathematics lessons.

Your self-evaluation is accurate and based on strong evidence of school improvement. However, the areas you identify that require further improvement are not clear in your school improvement plan. You have not prioritised which target in the improvement plan is the most important and should be addressed first.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have rigorous and effective systems in place to ensure that all pupils are safe. The single central record of checks made on adults working with pupils at the school meets requirements.

You and the staff keep exceptionally detailed and secure records for the most vulnerable pupils. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) carefully monitors the activity on all pupils' files weekly and follows up actions taken with deputy DSLs.

Pupils feel safe in the school and say there is no bullying of any kind. One pupil explained, 'People have like arguments but there's no bullying.' Pupils also told inspectors that they are confident to talk to staff if they have any concerns, and they greatly value the pastoral support team.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to check whether you have succeeded in reducing the number of pupils referred to the 'reflection room', which is your internal exclusion room. Over the last two years, you have carefully analysed the reasons why pupils are referred to this room. As a result, you have put alternative support systems in place to help pupils recognise when they need additional help to manage their behaviour. For example, you have established a strong pastoral team which is available for pupils to go to if they feel cross or worried. Pupils find this approach particularly helpful. In addition, you provide a range of opportunities for pupils to work with animals both at school and through external providers. Pupils say they find this work calms them and helps them get back on track in lessons. As a result of the additional provision, over the last year, you have reduced the number of pupils referred to the 'reflection room' by 50%.
- My second line of enquiry was about how effectively you have reduced persistent absence and raised pupils' attendance at school. You have robust systems in place to encourage parents to ensure that their children attend school every day. In addition, you have increased the range of rewards for good attendance. However, these are mainly aimed at groups of pupils rather than for individual pupils. You are in the process of reviewing your reward systems to ensure that they provide sufficient incentive. You have succeeded in reducing persistent absence by 9% this year. However, there is clear evidence that in real terms, current persistent absence is well below similar schools.
- My third line of enquiry focused on how you have improved the teaching of mathematics and raised pupils' achievement in mathematics. Your own monitoring of mathematics teaching and the wide range of inspection evidence, including a detailed scrutiny of pupils' work with the leader for mathematics, indicates that teaching has improved over time. Pupils are more confident and achieve better outcomes than at the time of the last inspection. One pupil, new to the school, told inspectors that she had learned more in the last six weeks in mathematics than ever before.
- During our joint observations of teaching and learning in mathematics, you agreed that, although teaching has improved, not all adults understand how to make the most of opportunities to deepen pupils' understanding and learning in mathematics.
- My fourth line of enquiry was to check how you have improved liaison with schools who place pupils at the school. In addition, I wanted to check how you support pupils to move on to further education and work. I spoke to a number of school leaders who place pupils at your school. They explained how effectively you introduce pupils to their new learning environment and how rapidly they settle in. You explained how you make sure schools and the local authority give you timely information about pupils so that you can ensure they have the best provision to meet their needs.
- You make every effort to ensure that pupils move on to education, employment or training (EET). For example, 90% of your pupils go on to further education, apprenticeships, employment or colleges. You are able to account for all those

pupils who are not in EET. You provide pupils with effective independent careers advice and guidance. One pupil said, 'You can talk to them about your future and they don't put you down. They really encourage you to reach your goals.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- staff know and understand the priorities for school improvement
- areas you identify for improvement in your self-evaluation are within the school improvement plan and are carefully prioritised
- all staff understand how to deepen pupils' understanding and learning in mathematics lessons.

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

Julie Winyard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors spoke with: you and the heads of school; the mathematics leader; the pastoral support team; the governors; the staff; a representative from the local authority; a sample of senior leaders from schools who place pupils at the school; the headteacher of the virtual school from Hertfordshire; the deputy chief constable for Central Bedfordshire; pupils; and parents. We observed learning and teaching in mathematics lessons and scrutinised pupils' work with the mathematics leader. We scrutinised a range of documents, including your self-evaluation and school's improvement plan. We scrutinised a range of safeguarding documentation and a sample of pupils' files. I scrutinised 11 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and 31 responses to the online questionnaire for staff. There were no responses to Ofsted's online pupils' questionnaire.