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Lee Kane
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Dear Mr Kane

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Astor Secondary School

Following my remote inspection with Louise Walker, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 4 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken to provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require improvement.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 (coronavirus) lockdown restrictions, this monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school has received three successive judgements of requires improvement. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in January 2020.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- ensure that leaders of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) work with subject leaders as planned so that all pupils with SEND get the support for their learning that they need
- execute fully their plans to boost pupils' reading skills by updating their assessment of pupils, targeting support for those at an early stage of reading and supporting pupils' reading within their different subjects.

Context

- Since the previous inspection in January 2020, the school has changed its name. One deputy headteacher has left and you have restructured pastoral support, forming a new welfare and well-being team. The model of governance has changed. Now the trust board is supported by three committees and five new trustees have been appointed.
- In the autumn term, most pupils attended regularly up until mid-October. However, between then and Christmas, just over a third of the pupils had to self-isolate for a short period. This affected Years 7 and 11 more than other year groups. In addition, all sixth formers were required to self-isolate for a short period.
- At the time of this inspection, approximately one in seven pupils were being educated on site for all or part of each week. This included half of vulnerable pupils and a small number of pupils with SEND.

Main findings

- Leaders' determination that pupils continue learning, together with excellent relationships with families and the local community, form the linchpin of the care, education and support that pupils receive. Learning from their experiences last year, leaders and trustees adapted their plans and so were well prepared for the third national lockdown in January 2021. This means pupils learning at home and in school continue to receive a suitably broad curriculum based on their usual timetables.
- Subject leaders have recently adapted their plans with a view to ensuring a sharper focus on the development of pupils' knowledge within their subjects. Appropriately, they have opted to delay aspects of practical learning in subjects such as music, physical education, dance and science until later in the year. Seeking and responding to pupil and parent feedback, teachers have adapted their planning and the resources they use during remote learning lessons. As one pupil told me: 'The best thing about [remote learning] this term is teachers really care about their lessons and try to get us all involved.'

- Staff at Astor Secondary School are passionate that the welfare and well-being of pupils are given top priority. Vulnerable pupils who are attending school benefit from the additional support and guidance from the staff available in school. In addition, leaders and staff work as a team to provide appropriate additional care and assistance for vulnerable pupils who are not currently in school. In preparation for the full reopening from next week, staff have wisely designed tailored programmes to help reintegrate pupils back into school.
- Following the last inspection, leaders started to implement structured programmes of support for pupils who struggle with their reading. Staff were trained to teach phonics to support pupils at the earliest stages of reading. Early signs were promising, with examples of some pupils showing a significant increase in their skills and engagement with reading. However, this work has slowed during the pandemic. Trustees and leaders agree that the promotion of reading remains an important priority.
- Leaders are committed to ensuring that Year 11 and Year 13 pupils maintain their studying and are well prepared for their next stage of education. Staff focus on nurturing pupils' well-being and boosting their confidence through providing additional assessment opportunities so that they know how well they are doing. Pupils told us that they trust and respect their teachers' judgements and so feel confident about their examination grades this year.
- Pupils with SEND who are attending school this term gain access to staff who know them well and can support their individual needs during and between lessons. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) recognises that it has been difficult to offer such in-depth support to all of the pupils with SEND who are learning from home. Leaders know that a priority for when these pupils return will be for the SENCo and subject leaders to work closely to design appropriate support to consolidate and boost these pupils' subject knowledge and skills.
- The recent restructuring of governance has boosted trustees' capacity to challenge and oversee school improvement. Trustees have closely monitored the education offered by the school during the pandemic. They have assured themselves that leaders are making every effort to encourage pupils to participate. In addition, they have monitored and offered challenge to leaders around the provision for pupils with SEND and safeguarding systems at the school.
- You and your team are outward looking, making appropriate use of your links with primary schools in the multi-academy trust and other local schools to access relevant staff training. The local authority knows the school well and has worked with leaders to support improvements to attendance.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, staff, the chief executive officer of The Dover Federation For The Arts Multi Academy Trust (DFAMAT), representatives of those responsible for governance and a representative of the local authority to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also reviewed examples of trustees' reports of visits, looked at examples of teachers' planning and recordings from remote lessons, and met remotely with a small group of pupils. We took account of the school's own parent survey and looked at 57 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 63 staff questionnaires.

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

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector