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Steve Fox
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Dear Mr Fox

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Ardley Hill Academy

Following my visit to your school on 5 May 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring inspection 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 improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) 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.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to ensure that:

- in all subjects, the teaching of the curriculum enables pupils to build up their knowledge securely over time, so that they can use it to complete increasingly complex questions and tasks
- the weakest readers get the help they need to catch up quickly
- governors thoroughly check leaders' actions to improve the extent to which the curriculum in each subject is well planned and taught.

Context

Since the previous section 5 inspection, the school has joined the Chiltern Learning Trust. There have been a number of changes in staffing, particularly within the leadership team. You and one of your deputy headteachers, who is also responsible for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), have been in post since April 2020.

The school received an additional monitoring visit in February 2021. At the time, inspectors were of the view that you were providing an effective education during the pandemic. Teachers were well placed to deliver remote learning to those pupils who were learning at home. Remote learning is still in place and used when needed. You have appropriate procedures in place for class teachers who need to isolate to continue to plan and teach lessons remotely.

At the time of this inspection, two year-group 'bubbles' had recently returned to school after isolating for a two-week period. There are currently no children absent due to COVID-19.

Main findings

The previous full inspection highlighted weaknesses in leadership and management. This had led to pupils in Years 5 and 6 not doing as well as they should in English and mathematics. Since then, the trust has been providing valuable support to help develop the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. This has helped to improve the leadership of, and to develop the curriculum within, English and mathematics. Subject leaders for English and mathematics have carefully chosen the important content that they want pupils to know. You have set up systems to check what it is that teaching has enabled pupils to learn and do. This has helped teachers and leaders to better identify any gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding, so that teachers can address these. As a result, pupils' knowledge and understanding continue to improve in both English and mathematics.

There is now a consistency in the teaching of mathematics across the school. Pupils' problem-solving work shows that they are now being suitably challenged in mathematics. Pupils say that teachers give them strategies to help them work things out by themselves. Teachers and subject leaders have successfully identified gaps in pupils' learning from when they were not in school. Teachers plan small-group lessons for pupils to catch up. Teachers are using a range of strategies to help pupils to develop a deeper understanding of mathematical vocabulary.

You have prioritised improving pupils' reading and understanding of what they read. Mathematics and reading plans focus on developing pupils' vocabulary. Teachers choose books carefully to support pupils' language development across subjects. This sparks pupils' interest in the topics they are studying. Pupils in Years 5 and 6 read a wide range of literature. They are keen to discuss books they enjoy that link

to things they are learning about in other subjects, and to books that they read at home.

The leader for phonics has high expectations for all pupils. Leaders are ensuring that teaching staff across the school develop a thorough understanding of phonics. In lessons, pupils in Years 1 and 2 are keen to show what they know. Pupils who struggle receive extra support. There is more work to do to ensure that the support pupils receive is precise enough in meeting their individual needs, so that all can catch up quickly.

The provision for pupils with SEND has improved since the time of the previous full inspection. Pupils with SEND are receiving the additional support they need to access the school's curriculum at an appropriate level. Experienced leaders and adults plan additional activities to support pupils' social and emotional needs. This is in line with their individual education, health and care plans.

There is still more work to do to develop the curriculum for subjects other than English and mathematics. Leaders have broadly planned what they want pupils to know and be able to do for each curriculum subject, but this planning sometimes lacks detail and clarity. Leaders have started to develop more precise plans so that new teaching can build on what pupils already know and prepare them for subsequent learning. This work remains at an early stage.

Many governors are new in post. They have increased the level of challenge to leaders since the previous section 5 inspection. However, COVID-19 has prevented governors from carrying out their usual monitoring activities on the school site. They have not been able to thoroughly check the impact of leaders' actions to improve the quality of education.

Additional support

You and your leaders have prioritised actions appropriately in line with improvement plans. School leaders at all levels are working with specialists from local schools. This is providing valuable opportunities to share good practice and expertise. Improvement plans demonstrate that leaders know what they need to do to ensure that the quality of education is good.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the headteacher, deputy headteachers, including the special educational needs coordinator, the multi-academy trust's chief executive officer and school improvement partner, the subject leaders for English, mathematics and phonics, the trust leader for safeguarding, and three members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. I also met with pupils from Years 5 and 6 and visited lessons across the school. I listened to pupils read from

Years 1 and 2 and scrutinised a range of documents, including the single central register, leaders' curriculum plans and minutes of governing body meetings.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the Chiltern Learning Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Cindy Impey
Her Majesty's Inspector