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Dear Dominic Downes

Urgent inspection of Rye College

Following my visit with Sue Keeling, His Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 29 June 2023, I write on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and the time you took to discuss your school.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for urgent inspections. The inspection was carried out because His Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about aspects of the personal development of pupils at the school and the effectiveness of leadership and management (including governance). This was as a result of complaints relating to the teaching of relationships and sex education. While Ofsted does not investigate specific complaints through inspection, during this visit we focused particularly on relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) and the teaching of protected characteristics as defined by law.

We do not give graded judgements on urgent inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a graded inspection, which will be carried out under section 5 of the Act and be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the urgent inspection as a graded inspection immediately. This inspection gave us no such concerns.

Evidence

We met with the headteacher, other school leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Aquinas Church of England Education Trust, representatives of the trust board, including the chair of trustees, representatives of the academy advisory council and representatives of the local authority. We also talked to a number of parents, a wide range of pupils and groups of staff. We reviewed curriculum plans, policies and minutes of meetings of the trust and the academy advisory council. We observed pupils learning and at social times. We considered responses to our surveys from pupils, staff and parents.

Main Findings

The school ensures that the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) that pupils receive is covering the requirements of statutory guidance. The school uses widely available materials which explore contested areas. The vast majority of pupils develop a secure understanding of protected characteristics and why they are important. They learn about the law that underpins them, the variety of views in our society and the importance of debating these and respecting each others' views. Pupils enjoy weekly 'life education' lessons and take them seriously, alongside linked work in tutor time and assemblies. They are enthusiastic about participating in discussions, including regular activities such as the 'Thursday debates'. Pupils rightly see these aspects of their education as an important part of their personal development and life at school. The concerns relating to the teaching of RSHE that led to this inspection do not reflect pupils' normal experiences at school.

You, trustees and leaders rightly recognise that monitoring and evaluating the RSHE curriculum regularly is a vital part of your work. When an issue arises, such as the one that prompted this inspection, you tackle it swiftly and effectively. Trustees and the CEO have a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the school's provision for RSHE. They use a range of ways to gather information about the curriculum's impact, including seeking pupils' views. They review the curriculum, with the help of the academy advisory council, to make sure that it meets pupils' needs.

Pupils are well prepared to consider the range of perspectives and beliefs they encounter in modern life. They typically tackle a wide range of issues in a thoughtful, well-informed, articulate way, including through subjects across the curriculum. Pupils are able to talk in detail about what they have learned over time. They think carefully about topics from a range of angles, valuing opinions that are different from their own. Pupils are taught how to debate contentious subjects. Most pupils learn to do so respectfully and maturely. For example, pupils are clear that there are contested views about gender, sexuality and whether these are assigned at birth. One pupil summed up the views of many when he said, 'We are taught to think for ourselves, but also to respect everybody's point of view.'

You and other leaders make sure that staff receive effective, regular training in order to teach RSHE in a sensitive and impartial way. Teachers have good subject knowledge and

very largely promote debate and manage pupils' discussions well. Pupils recognise that teachers usually handle challenging conversations effectively. Pupils report that teachers help them to listen actively to others and to reflect deeply. The trust has invested in this aspect of the school's work because trustees and the CEO see it has a high priority. Consequently, teaching and support staff have learned about the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion, including how to put the school's policy into practice to support pupils' personal development.

Parents are kept up to date about pupils' learning in RHSE through weekly bulletins. These outline what pupils will be studying during the week. Leaders engage with parents productively. Parents are able to approach the school when they have any questions in relation to what their children are learning about. The majority of parents are very positive about the school's work to support pupils' personal development. They are impressed with how the school approaches complex subjects. Reflecting the views of many other parents, one commented, 'Rye College is a great school. My child is very happy, feels safe and is supported by teachers.'

Discrimination of any kind is not tolerated by either leaders or pupils. Any issues are followed up and dealt with robustly. Pupils are confident that staff take the right action to deal with problems or worries that they might have. Staff know pupils well, adapting learning in personal development to meet pupils' needs effectively. Leaders have created a culture of kindness and mutual support in the school. Pupils work together well, encouraging and supporting each other to learn and achieve.

I am copying this letter to chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Aquinas Church of England Education Trust multi-academy trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Haynes
His Majesty's Inspector