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Mr Jonathan Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Smith

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Ardley Hill Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 26 March 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 academy 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.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in April 2018, the academy was also judged to require improvement.

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 academy to become good.

The academy should take further action to:

- consolidate recent improvements in the effectiveness of the governing board and continue to address the recommendations identified in the external review of governance
- evaluate the impact of actions for improvement more rigorously so that leaders always have an accurate view of the school's performance
- sustain the pace of rapid improvement in raising standards by regularly checking the school's strategic development plan against the desired outcomes to ensure that the school continues to improve.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, the former and current upper key stage 2 phase leaders, and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. Additionally, I met with a group of governors, including the chair and vice-chair of the governing board and the school's external consultant to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. I reviewed the school's own evaluation, the strategic development plan, and several subject leader action plans. I visited all classes, looked at pupils' work and scrutinised a range of documents relating to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. I also spoke to some parents at the beginning of the day and met with a group of pupils to discuss their learning and aspects of school life.

Context

Since the academy's section 5 inspection in April 2018, the staff team has been largely stable. The deputy headteacher has returned to her role following maternity leave and several middle leader roles have been reviewed and changed to focus more closely on improving pupils' academic and well-being needs. There have been some changes to the governing board. An experienced governor took over the role of chair in October 2018. Two new governors also joined the governing board at this time. Final preparations are taking place for the school to join the Chiltern Learning Trust. This process is due to be completed by the end of the current academic year.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, leaders and governors have been resolute in their determination to improve the quality of education, particularly in upper key stage 2. Consequently, improvement is evident in all areas identified as needing attention in the previous inspection report.

Senior and middle leaders are clear about what needs to be done to improve teaching and pupils' outcomes, including in Year 5 and Year 6. Through staff training and sharing best practice, leaders have successfully raised teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve by the end of Year 6. Teachers plan activities that more effectively meet pupils' needs, including for disadvantaged pupils and the most able. The learning observed in lessons during the inspection showed that teachers have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. For example, as part of their learning about Shakespeare, pupils in Year 6 were enthusiastically composing their own sonnets using rhyming couplets. Teachers set work that is challenging for the majority of pupils, including the most able. Pupils said they enjoy their lessons because they are 'fun', and they relish the demands of the 'harder work' their teachers give to them. Work in pupils' books demonstrates that most pupils are making better progress in reading, writing and mathematics than previously.

The English and mathematics leaders have reviewed the quality of teaching and supported teachers to put in place the school's chosen teaching approaches for these subjects. For example, in reading, pupils have access to a range of high-quality texts. Teachers plan reading and writing activities based around these books that develop pupils' vocabulary and grammar skills effectively. In mathematics, pupils receive frequent opportunities to solve problems to deepen their understanding and are encouraged to explain their understanding verbally, as well as in written form. Senior and subject leaders monitor these teaching approaches closely to ensure that they are being used consistently across the school.

Leaders have made sure that teachers are increasingly using assessment information to inform their planning and to address any gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. This has helped teachers to quickly identify pupils who need extra support with their learning. Teachers then put in place prompt, specific additional teaching, often on the same day, to enable pupils to catch up swiftly. Well-trained teaching assistants also provide tailored support for those pupils who need focused help with their reading, writing and mathematics.

Leaders have established clear expectations for each year group of what pupils should achieve in reading, writing and mathematics. These have been shared and are understood by teachers. This is keeping teachers focused on ensuring that pupils are on track to make at least good progress by the time they leave the school at the end of Year 6.

During my visit, pupils were typically well behaved in lessons and when moving around the school. There is a calm and purposeful atmosphere throughout all classes, including in the school's alternative provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). When I visited this classroom, the pupils were happily engaged in their learning because of the effective support and care provided by staff.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have worked hard to promote the importance of good attendance with parents and carers through regular newsletters and meetings. Leaders monitor pupils' attendance rigorously. They work closely with parents and the education welfare officer when pupils' attendance is causing concern. As a result, the overall attendance for the school is improving.

Governance has been strengthened since the previous inspection. Governors are reflective and keen to improve their practice further. Prior to the external review of governance which took place in December 2018, the governing board had already taken steps to sharpen their practice. For example, governors scrutinise assessment information more thoroughly to understand how well different pupil groups are achieving in reading, writing and mathematics. They carry out focused visits to check how successfully teaching is meeting pupils' needs, including for those pupils who are disadvantaged. Governors work more closely with senior and middle leaders to ensure that they are well placed to question and challenge the impact of

actions taken. This is evident in the minutes of governing board meetings and is something leaders welcome.

Despite this clear improvement in the effectiveness of the governing board, governors' actions are relatively new and the improved practice to hold leaders sufficiently to account over time is not yet embedded. Equally, the areas for governors to improve that were identified in the external review have not yet been fully addressed to ensure that governors carry out their responsibilities thoroughly.

Leaders and governors have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and the challenges it faces. Actions since the previous inspection have focused on developing leadership and on improving outcomes for all pupils. However, leaders and governors are not certain they have an accurate view of the school's performance because they do not evaluate thoroughly that the actions they are taking are successful.

The school's strategic development plan focuses appropriately on the weaknesses identified during the April 2018 inspection and the school's own priorities. It identifies who leads each improvement initiative and who monitors the actions taken in order to measure for success. However, leaders and governors are not evaluating for success accurately enough because they do not carry out regular and measurable checks against the desired end points.

External support

The external consultant commissioned by the school is providing effective support through regular visits to check on leaders' actions to improve teaching and raise standards. The local authority also supports the school well, for example by providing training for the recently appointed special educational needs coordinator. Additionally, the local authority arranged for support from a nearby special school as leaders reviewed and improved the additional resource provision for pupils with ASD.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing board, 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

Fiona Webb
Her Majesty's Inspector