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Mrs Lucy Monk
Principal
ARK Helenswood Academy
The Ridge
St Leonard's-on-Sea
East Sussex
TN37 7PS

Dear Mrs Monk

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to ARK Helenswood Academy

Following my visit to your school on 13 April 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in July 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become good. The school should take further action to:

- improve further the progress, outcomes and attendance for disadvantaged pupils who are entitled to the support of pupil premium funding
- continue the successful work in improving teaching, so that, in particular, opportunities to develop pupils' learning beyond the set objectives are not missed.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I held meetings with middle leaders, a representative of the ARK academy chain and governors. With you, I visited lessons at the lower school and upper school sites. I observed at break- and lunchtimes. I met with pupils and scrutinised some of their work. I checked important documents, including the school improvement plan. I had visited the sixth-form provision in March 2016 when inspecting Ark William Parker Academy, and took the evidence from that visit into account.

Context

There were a number of planned staffing changes at the start of the autumn term 2015. The sixth form, which is shared with the nearby Ark William Parker Academy for boys, is based on the William Parker site.

Main findings

The school has made clear improvement since the inspection. You and your senior team have implemented positive changes with considerable success. The pupils with whom I met correctly pointed out that the format of lessons has changed for the better. One commented that teaching is 'more organised'. Lessons are better focused, with clear objectives. Teachers know their subjects well. They expect more of their pupils than at the inspection. They explain things sharply and clearly. They are particularly quick to ensure that pupils understand how to answer examination questions or show that they have learned the subject matter. The weaknesses identified in the teaching of English at the inspection are being addressed appropriately. Lessons are longer than they were in the previous school year, which the pupils believe allows more time for them to learn in depth but without being too long, when their interest could diminish. Activities are carefully timed and planned, so that lessons proceed efficiently without time being wasted.

In the lessons we observed together, we saw all of the above strengths consistently. At the same time, we saw a number of lessons where the pupils' learning could have been better still. This usually occurred when teachers felt they must stick closely to the set learning objectives, missing some opportunities to allow the pupils to take their learning further. For example, in one lesson, the teacher explained correctly and technically how a simile was used in a poetry extract, making a helpful link to pupils' own writing, which was the set objective. However, this was done in isolation from other features of the poem, and without fully allowing pupils to understand and be touched by the linguistic, affective and emotional richness of the extract as a whole, which is its point.

We were fortunate to observe some stunning practice, namely a very precise and imaginative dance sequence excellently composed and performed in a routine lesson by Year 8 pupils. In general, the school's curriculum is broad and provides opportunities for pupils to shine in different subjects. Rightly, you wish to expand further the range of activities available outside school hours and also the opportunities for pupils to consider issues related to the place of faith in society.

The school has improved the way it assesses pupils' progress and needs. It keeps detailed records, which are readily available to all staff. These improvements help staff to provide different work to challenge pupils and meet their different needs, including those who demonstrate very high ability in particular subjects. You recognise that the improvements need to continue.

The GCSE results in 2015 were notably better than in the previous year. A higher than average proportion of pupils achieved at least five good GCSEs, including in English and mathematics. However, this good news was only partial. Pupils deemed to be disadvantaged and entitled to the support of pupil premium funding did notably less well than their peers and all pupils nationally. There are some signs that this achievement gap is becoming less marked across current year groups, but it is still too wide. In addition, disadvantaged pupils attend notably less well than the other pupils. The school spends the pupil premium money on appropriate things. However, it is not having enough impact. Little of it is spent specifically to raise the aspirations of pupils and this should be reconsidered as a matter of priority.

In the sixth form, learners' achievement is improving but is mixed. Some subjects perform better than others. The strengths and weaknesses within the joint sixth form are similar to those in the rest of the school.

The behaviour of pupils that I observed was compliant and positive. Pupils concentrate suitably in lessons. They listen carefully to their teachers and to each other. Adults are good role models. They respect the pupils and dress smartly. Pupils say that the new system of behaviour for learning points ensures that any disruptive behaviour is stopped very quickly. Pupils are generally friendly, good humoured, considerate and polite. They are happy to talk about their learning. They behave safely and sensibly around the school, without needing high levels of supervision. They say that there is little or no bullying and that staff deal promptly with any problems.

You and the senior team lead the school very purposefully. The changes you have made this academic year are bringing clear and effective improvement. Staff appreciate the improved opportunities this year for regular training and constructive internal meetings. The performance management of staff is well organised. Middle leaders, including heads of faculty and the special educational needs coordinator, understand very well what they need to do. They receive effective training, show initiative and work as a consistent and perceptive team. They involve others and can show how their work brings improvement for the pupils. They also assess accurately how further improvement can be made.

The local governing body is well organised, committed and purposeful. Its members visit the school regularly and usefully. They are clear about how well it is doing. For example, while being pleased with the school's recent progress, they are suitably concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. Governors ask challenging questions of you and the staff.

External support

ARK supports the school very usefully. It holds the school to account suitably and provides valuable training and development opportunities for staff. The school also sustains a healthy and productive relationship with the local authority.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for East Sussex.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector