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Ms Caroline Barlow
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Dear Ms Barlow

Short inspection of Heathfield Community College

Following my visit to the school on 24 May 2016 with Helen Pennington, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in March 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since taking up post at the beginning of this academic year, you have revitalised Heathfield Community College bringing drive, vision and a very clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Together with governors, you wasted no time in restructuring the senior leadership team and the school is rapidly improving because of the inspirational leadership that you and your team provide. Parents, governors and the local authority praise your leadership, as one parent explained: 'The new headteacher has re-energised the college with fresh impetus, focus and much needed direction.'

Although detail in the school improvement plan could be improved, you and your senior team have an accurate understanding of the school and use this to identify strengths and areas for development. You usefully obtain external validation of the quality of your work from the local authority, external consultants and through working with other local schools.

Since the last inspection, the school has continued to focus on the areas identified for improvement. As a result, the quality of teaching and the proportion of pupils achieving five higher-grade GCSEs including English and mathematics improved in 2015, and reliable forecasts for 2016 indicate even higher proportions of pupils on target to attain this benchmark this year. For some time, academic and vocational

achievement in the sixth form has been in line with, or above, national averages. Current progress information indicates that this is improving and learners make strong progress in the sixth form.

The strong pastoral system nurtures good working relationships between staff and pupils, and ensures that all pupils' pastoral and welfare needs are given careful support, alongside their academic requirements. Consequently, pupils feel that staff care for them and understand their needs. Pupils and sixth formers who met with us enthused about their school. They have high aspirations and their behaviour remains very good. There is a strong community spirit and the school is a warm and welcoming place to be.

Your evaluation of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is accurate and informs planning for the support of individual staff. You have introduced a school-wide focus on 'four pillars of learning', which teachers use to inform their planning and raise the level of challenge in their lessons. Most teachers plan interesting lessons and use effective questioning to promote deeper thinking and reflection and ensure a swift pace of learning. Leaders are aware that in a small minority of lessons teachers offer less challenge and the pace is slower. Systems are in place to support these teachers. Pupils know their targets and the high-quality work in their books demonstrates that they make good progress. As a result, pupils do as well as, or better than, other pupils nationally in their GCSE examinations in nearly all subject areas. Learners in the sixth form feel very well supported by their teachers and those currently in the school are making better progress in their A-level subjects than has been the case in the past.

Staff morale is very high and there is a sense of pride in the quality of learning in the school among staff and pupils. Pupils and sixth formers confidently welcome visitors, are proud to share their work and enjoy working with their teachers. Displays of high-quality work in corridors and classrooms celebrate the high standards that pupils are achieving. The overwhelming majority of parents responding to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, praised the school and would recommend it. As one parent commented:

'This school is amazing in every area. I feel blessed to have it on my doorstep. My first two children have thrived here and the two next ones are desperately waiting to get here!'

Pupils eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funding to support disadvantaged pupils) have not achieved as well as their peers in the past. You and governors rightly see closing these gaps as an urgent priority. Leaders are taking effective steps to improve the progress for this group. However, a more thorough evaluation of the impact of each different initiative is needed to prioritise the most effective strategies and ensure that the gaps are completely eradicated.

Your provision for pupils with special educational needs or disability is very well organised and led by the special educational needs coordinator, and is a strength of the school. Individual bespoke plans clearly support these pupils to make good

progress over time. The school's specialist provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder meets their needs very well. Their attendance is particularly high and this group make good progress.

Overall attendance is in line with the national average and improving. However, you are aware that the attendance of some groups, including those eligible for the pupil premium and some pupils with special educational needs or disability other than autistic spectrum disorder, needs to be better. You have successfully introduced a range of initiatives which are beginning to reduce gaps in attendance for these groups.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, your staff and governors appropriately place a very high emphasis on pupils' safety and welfare. The staff vetting record known as the single central record is meticulously maintained. Appropriate checks are made against all adults who work with pupils, and staff receive relevant and regular training on safeguarding.

Leaders have ensured that policies and guidelines on all relevant aspects of safeguarding are in place and clearly steer the very good practice in the school, fostering a caring culture of vigilance. Regular communication between key staff and other agencies ensures timely and effective support for pupils of concern, and reviews of the impact of actions already taken.

Tutor times and assemblies are used well to help pupils learn about how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. Pupils and sixth formers confirm that they feel safe and know that members of staff are always available for them to share any concerns they may have.

Inspection findings

- You give the school strong, purposeful and highly effective leadership. Your vision for improving teaching and learning through focusing on 'four pillars of learning' is shared by the whole staff. Having this common approach has led to improved lesson planning and sharing of best practice within and between subjects. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved.
- You have recruited wisely and invested in training staff to create a talented and dedicated leadership team with clear lines of responsibility for academic and pastoral leadership. This has led to significantly improved standards of achievement. You are very ably supported by your senior team and governing body to bring about further improvements.
- Governors are an enthusiastic and effective team. They know the school well and offer wise and insightful challenge to you and your senior team. The chair of the governing body is rightly very proud of the school and he makes sure that the governing body offers very good strategic support for its development.

- The sixth form is very well led and ensures that all requirements of the 16–19 study pathways are met. Internal and external moderation of assessments are ensuring that standards have improved and achievement is currently higher than it was in 2015. Sixth formers are universally positive about provision and could not speak highly enough of their teachers, recognising the extra support and guidance that they give. Learners play an active part in wider school life, willingly mentoring younger pupils and getting involved in a wide range of trips, clubs and charity fundraising events. High-quality careers advice ensures that they are very well prepared for their next steps to university or apprenticeships.
- By the end of key stage 4, standards in nearly all subjects in 2015 were above or well above the national average. Achievement in mathematics improved significantly for all pupil groups in 2015 and they continue to make very high levels of progress. Although overall progress in English was strong in 2015, disadvantaged pupils underperformed compared with their peers. This is no longer the case: this group are currently making much improved progress. In previous years, the school's policy of entering pupils for GCSE science exams early meant that not all pupils achieved the grades they were capable of. This too has changed. New systems and improved teaching in science has ensured that all groups of pupils are currently making much improved progress.
- Leaders set ambitious targets and teachers ensure that the most able pupils are regularly challenged through tasks that promote deep thinking and evaluation and link different topics. Teachers in mathematics are leading the way. The most able pupils in Year 8 are not only stretched in class: many are keen participants in a lunchtime club where they receive even higher levels of challenge. This gives them the confidence to engage with, and successfully solve, complex mathematical problems and questions. As a result, they develop very high aspirations together with the knowledge and skills to achieve them.
- Leaders make very effective use of performance information to coordinate effective targeted interventions which accelerate pupils' progress. In previous years, interventions to support disadvantaged pupils were mainly targeted during key stage 4. Leaders rightly recognised that more needed to be done during key stage 3, and this year challenged teachers to maximise progress for all groups of pupils in the younger year groups. As a result, the gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are closing in English, mathematics and science in key stage 3. Senior leaders know that better evaluations of the various initiatives being used are needed to find the most effective strategies so as to completely eradicate these gaps.
- Leaders have responded well to the areas for improvement identified during the previous inspection. Regular coaching and training opportunities have led to shared ideas and resources, and supported staff development and improvements to outcomes. You recognise that further work is to be done to ensure that all teaching becomes as effective as the strongest practice already in the school.

- Leaders are passionate about wanting the best for every pupil and relationships between staff and pupils are particularly strong. Pastoral support is very well coordinated and effective. Staff work well together to inspire and challenge the pupils and communicate well with parents. As a result, pupils are well supported and the number of exclusions has fallen considerably over recent years.
- Most teachers have high expectations and use their good subject and assessment knowledge to design stimulating lessons. They focus clearly on pupils' intended learning. Teachers in mathematics, English and graphics give precise feedback and guidance to pupils, who then use these to improve their work. Inspectors witnessed how several teachers use questioning and discussion very effectively to probe and develop pupils' understanding. Where all these activities take place, pupils' books evidence how they make good progress in lessons and over time. In a minority of science lessons seen, the teacher's expectations and levels of challenge were not as high and so the pace of learning was slower.
- Pupils who have special educational needs or disability are offered bespoke support that is well matched to their particular need, and their progress and welfare are routinely reviewed. Teaching assistants are very effective at supporting these pupils in class, so that they can participate fully in lessons. As a result, this group make good progress over time.
- Senior leaders have implemented clear systems to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in lessons to identify strengths and priorities quickly. They have rightly prioritised ensuring that all teachers concentrate on literacy across the curriculum, and this is improving standards. For example, in a Year 9 science lesson, with a careful focus on subject-specific vocabulary, the teacher crafted a class discussion, encouraging pupils to evaluate their results from their 'meteorite impact crater' experiment. As a result, all the pupils engaged in producing their own high-level extended written conclusions from their data.
- The well-stocked and well-used library promotes a culture of learning and love of reading. The librarian passionately and proactively ensures that the library is at the heart of school life and offers a calm, yet stimulating, learning environment. Consequently, the library not only offers an independent learning hub well used by pupils and sixth formers to support homework and revision, but also hosts regular competitions and events and offers a pleasant area for vulnerable pupils who welcome a quiet space.
- Behaviour is very good. Pupils are polite, friendly and continue to conduct themselves very well in lessons and around the school site. They value their learning and play a full part in lessons. When challenged, many can demonstrate sophisticated learning skills. For example, in a Year 8 history lesson, pupils worked collaboratively and then engaged in independent research in order to provide what they needed to complete their extended piece of writing.
- Pupils report that they feel safe and happy at the school and parents confirm this view. Bullying is thought to be rare and pupils are confident that any issues that arise are swiftly resolved by staff when they do occur.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- evaluation and improvement planning at all levels measures more sharply the impact of initiatives to find the most effective strategies more easily
- teaching becomes as consistently good and challenging for all pupils as the best examples presently in the school
- gaps between the achievement of pupils eligible for the pupil premium and others in school continue to close rapidly.

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. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors visited tutor times, an assembly and 18 lessons in the school, and looked at learning jointly with senior leaders. We spoke with pupils in lessons and looked at some of their work as well as meeting with pupils both formally and informally. Meetings were held with three members of the governing body and senior leaders. Documentary evidence, including policies, strategic planning documents and analyses of pupils' achievements were evaluated. We also scrutinised documents relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance, and records of governing body meetings. We also reviewed 276 responses to Parent View, and 105 staff and 220 pupil questionnaires.