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2 November 2017

Mr Keith Douglas
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Dear Mr Douglas

Short inspection of Rickmansworth School

Following my visit to the school on 17 October 2017 with Daniel Gee, HMI, 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 September 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have shown a relentless determination to change the culture within the school. Leaders at all levels, governors, and the vast majority of staff have supported you well. You have had some notable success in your pursuit of excellence across all areas. You have galvanised staff so that each pupil is given every opportunity to achieve their best. The highly impressive monitoring systems help you to identify quickly pupils who are falling behind, provide appropriate support, and measure the impact of your actions closely. As a result, improvements in teaching and learning have led to outcomes rising sharply for many pupils since the last inspection. The school is now securely good. Elements of the sixth form, which were judged to be outstanding at the previous inspection, remain so.

Your school has a distinctive ethos and positive climate. Visitors receive a warm welcome and can see the strong relationships that exist between staff and pupils, based on cooperation and respect. You have skilfully combined the demand for high standards with a purposeful, but friendly atmosphere. This prepares pupils well for when they leave the school. Pupils confirmed this to be the case, and as one said, 'There is a nice balance where you are integrated into the real world slowly, but still have the teachers to fall back on.'

The school has benefited from your clear and calm leadership. There is now far greater stability and vision. Leaders are candid and objective; they have a perceptive and accurate view of the school's strengths and know the areas that require further development. You have built on what the school does well, and are

continually looking at ways to improve. The professional development that staff receive is a case in point. Staff value the excellent support that leaders provide for them because you carefully tailor training to meet their individual needs. This has led to highly effective teaching and learning, as seen by the proportion of staff receiving external teaching awards, and the improved outcomes in many subjects.

As a headteacher, you have modelled your high expectations for everyone to follow. Importantly, the school is not complacent; leaders and staff are always looking for ways to give pupils greater experiences so that you can raise their aspirations still further. Governors are equally ambitious and want the best outcomes for every child. They have acted upon the findings of their review of governance. They now have suitable mechanisms in place to give you the autonomy you need to drive improvement while monitoring the school's continued effectiveness. Alongside senior leaders, they have helped to guide the school through some turbulent times.

The vast majority of teaching observed during the inspection was lively, stimulating and productive. Where practice was most effective, teachers' high expectations and good subject knowledge ensured that questioning was used to check pupils' understanding and push them to think harder. Teachers plan work carefully, using a wide range of high-quality resources and activities, including practical work and group work, to support learning. The classrooms are lively learning environments where pupils display positive attitudes to learning; they sustain their concentration, support each other, listen carefully and work hard. For example, pupils in a Year 7 history lesson articulately shared their 'killer facts' as to why Henry VIII had made the break from Rome. Assessment in some subjects is a real strength because teachers explain to pupils very clearly what they have done well and how they can do even better.

The effective sixth-form leader has maintained the very high standards reported upon at the previous inspection. Inspectors saw teaching that was characterised by high-level discussion work, carefully planned learning, strong relationships, and a suitable blend of group activities and independent learning. Teachers' high aspirations of what students can achieve, alongside effective support, help students to adjust to the increased expectations at key stage 5 extremely well. As a result, the progress these students make has been in the top 25%, often the top 10%, of sixth forms nationally. Students are proud of their sixth form and take responsibility for their own learning. They enjoy the additional freedoms and responsibilities they have earned and respond positively to the trust placed in them. They told inspectors that staff teach them well, provide help outside of lessons, and guide and support them with their applications for further education, employment or training.

Throughout the inspection, pupils demonstrated consistently good behaviour. They move from lesson to lesson quickly and quietly. At breaktime, they queue patiently, act sensibly, play table tennis and treat each other with respect and kindness. Both inspectors commented on how enjoyable it was wandering around at breaktime and talking to pupils. Pupils willingly engaged inspectors in conversation; they were respectful, considerate and courteous and model the '6 Ricky Rs'. Staff on duty are 'light touch' and model high expectations in their interactions with pupils. One

student who joined the sixth form from another school said, 'I was made to feel very welcome because all the teachers and other students are so friendly and approachable.'

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils at Rickmansworth School feel safe, are safe and know how to stay safe. They explained how the school uses 'L Cubed' to provide them with useful information and strategies to stay safe in a variety of settings, including road safety, different types of abuse and when online. One pupil summed up the school's atmosphere nicely when he said, 'It feels like home. You feel safe.'

The overwhelming majority of parents agree that their children are safe. Pupils said that bullying is extremely rare, and on the few occasions it does occur, staff deal with it swiftly and effectively. Staff receive high-quality training and know what to do if they have concerns about the safety of any pupil in their care.

Leaders and governors ensure that safeguarding practice is compliant. The school regularly uses a 'mystery person' to check that staff remain ever vigilant and challenge unfamiliar people they see within school. Safeguarding and the well-being of pupils is clearly a key priority for the school.

Inspection findings

- The inspection was steered by four key lines of enquiry to check whether the school remains good. The first issue was whether disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress, given that published performance data from previous years indicates some underachievement. Leaders rightly have made this one of their raising achievement priorities and taken swift action to address it.
- Staff in most departments have a clear understanding of the barriers to learning disadvantaged pupils face. Pupils receive additional support so that they can access similar opportunities to other pupils. Work in pupils' books shows they are making better progress, and the rigorous monitoring processes confirm this to be the case across most subjects and year groups. The progress made by disadvantaged pupils in 2016 was below that made by other pupils nationally. Leaders' sharply focused interventions have led to rapid improvements in the progress these pupils made in 2017 across most subject areas. However, while disadvantaged pupils are catching up, their progress still lags behind other pupils in some subjects, notably mathematics.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities did not all make the progress of which they were capable in 2016. Teachers now use the information provided by the special educational needs coordinator to plan learning to meet pupils' needs more effectively. In 2017, this group of pupils made better progress from their starting points than all pupils nationally. However, as leaders acknowledged, the small cohorts and ever-changing needs of these pupils mean that continued close monitoring is essential.

- My second line of enquiry looked at the actions leaders are taking to ensure that all pupils attend well and exclusions, especially repeat exclusions, are reduced. Pupils enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in the high levels of attendance. You have taken effective action, through your increased focus on good attendance via awards, assemblies, and information in reports. Alongside this, the monitoring processes, including repeated home visits and increased use of fixed-penalty notices, are more stringent. For most pupils, absence has reduced and your overall attendance now exceeds the national average. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils still remains below that of others.
- You were aware of the need to reduce exclusion, including for certain groups of pupils. You have changed the pastoral structure, redesigned your reintegration processes, and focused on a restorative approach to poor behaviour. As a result, exclusions for all pupils, including repeat exclusions, have reduced significantly compared with the school's most recent published information.
- My third line of enquiry looked at the actions leaders have taken to maintain the standards in teaching, learning and assessment, especially for modern foreign languages, science and the most able students in the sixth form. Leaders, including subject leaders, monitor teaching, learning and assessment accurately and regularly. Using a wide range of evidence, you are able to draw telling conclusions that inform your self-evaluation and subsequent training needs. However, you rightly acknowledge that some inconsistencies in teaching, learning and assessment remain at either group or subject level.
- Pupils arrive at the school with prior attainment above the national average. In 2016, their progress was broadly in line with other pupils nationally. However, judicious leadership and effective teaching has ensured that outcomes rose markedly last year. In 2017, most pupils made significantly better progress than other pupils nationally. Achievement in art, photography, business, creative writing, economics, and food has been consistently impressive. Evidence seen in lessons, books and your accurate assessment information indicates that many pupils continue to achieve very well.
- You have been well aware of the need to raise standards in modern foreign languages and have provided challenge and support in equal measure. New leadership, external support, and a comprehensive action plan are some of the actions taken to improve pupils' outcomes. Your effective actions have led to significant improvements: attainment in French and German in 2017 was broadly in line with national averages, while pupils made much better progress in both subjects.
- Inspectors looked at outcomes in science because there have been some issues with recruitment historically. To overcome these, you have worked tirelessly to create an ethos in which staff are valued and can access opportunities to improve their practice as teachers and develop as leaders. The science leader, who joined in 2016, has been well supported. Weekly line-management meetings, assistance with the faculty self-evaluation processes and some key appointments mean there is now a far stronger and more stable department in place. Results in 2017

were much improved and pupils' progress is now broadly in line with national progress measures.

- The school's overall progress at key stage 5 has remained consistently strong. However, you are aware that the proportion of pupils achieving the very highest grades has declined slightly. The school's 'Able and Ambitious' programme is helping pupils to adopt a 'growth mindset' philosophy and raise their aspirations. Pupils are actively encouraged to focus on the positive aspect of situations and to tackle new challenges willingly. This is not just for sixth form students, but is benefiting pupils across all year groups. Evidence seen on inspection showed that pupils are aiming higher and looking beyond their target grades.
- My final line of enquiry was concerned with how effectively leaders communicate with parents. Some parents had expressed their concerns about aspects of the school's performance on Parent View. As the inspection progressed, more parents responded and a far more positive picture emerged. By the end, almost nine out of every 10 parents said that their children were happy, well looked after and make good progress. The vast majority of staff and pupils endorsed these views. One parent summed up the views of many when saying: 'Overall I am very happy with the school. When there have been issues, they have been dealt with sensitively and effectively. The social and emotional care is fantastic and overall learning is more than good.'
- While many parents were very positive, you know that a few are less positive in their view of the school. Inspectors did not see any evidence to support these less positive views, but you know the importance of addressing this perception. You are keen to continue your head's surgeries, the 'parent panel', your weekly messages and the 'Ricky Recorder' to convey the school's many positive features to all parents.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- staff continue to investigate why disadvantaged pupils' attendance and achievement are lower than that of their peers, and use this information to complement existing strategies that lead to more rapid improvement
- the excellent practice routinely seen in some subject areas is shared more widely to remove the inconsistencies that still exist between subjects, and to raise achievement for some groups, particularly for disadvantaged pupils in mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Randall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, a wide range of your senior and middle leaders, the chair and other members of the governing body, two groups of pupils, and had a telephone conversation with your school improvement partner. Together with senior leaders, we observed a small sample of lessons to see pupils at work. We reviewed school documents about self-evaluation and development planning, safeguarding including the single central record, and attendance and behaviour records. We also took account of the views of 63 staff and 144 pupils who responded to the online survey. We also considered the 230 responses by parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View.

There was a qualifying complaint, linked to pupils' well-being and safety. Inspectors considered the wider issues raised by this incident and implications for the school.