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30 May 2018

Mr James Shapland
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Shapland

Short inspection of Ashlyns School

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 2018 with Ofsted Inspectors Caroline Dawes and David Davies, 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 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You and your senior colleagues have led the school with determination, care and integrity. A very large majority of pupils, staff, parents and carers recognise and appreciate the way you have created a learning environment in which pupils can thrive. The school has continued to improve since the previous inspection. The overall progress that pupils make at key stage 4 has, on average, been consistently in line with, or better than, the progress made by pupils nationally. Students make similar overall progress in the sixth form. You have been determined to fulfil the school's espoused commitment to help all pupils 'aspire and achieve'.

Pupils are incredibly proud of their school and clearly enjoy attending. They value the school's unique blend of buildings, combining considerable history and character with modern sports facilities. As a result, they move around the site in a calm and orderly fashion and treat their facilities with care and consideration. They wear their uniforms smartly and they are very polite and courteous to adults and each other. They wholeheartedly engage in a very wide range of extra-curricular opportunities.

Teaching continues to improve. There is an industrious, purposeful and productive atmosphere in all lessons. Pupils work diligently, reflectively and with enthusiasm. Teachers consistently create and sustain constructive, trusting relationships. Pupils are confident in contributing to lessons and they ask and answer questions

articulately. They are never afraid of being wrong. Overwhelmingly, they maintain neat, clear, written records of their work which will aid future revision.

You and your senior colleagues have focused appropriately on following the recommendations made in the previous inspection report. You have worked very successfully to improve behaviour and the school's behaviour policy is applied consistently. It is now extremely rare for any pupil's learning to be disrupted by the behaviour of others. Teachers use questioning skilfully to explore and strengthen pupils' understanding and they effectively use detailed assessment information to plan their lessons.

You are certainly not complacent, and school leaders and governors are ambitious to improve the school further. The school's self-evaluation is thorough and perceptive and school leaders have established detailed plans to work towards the targets identified, such as ensuring that the remaining inconsistencies in the performance of different subject departments can be eliminated. Most importantly, you are very conscious that, over time, disadvantaged pupils at the school have not achieved as well as they should. All school leaders are clear that current strategies, which are successfully accelerating the progress of disadvantaged pupils currently in the school, need to continue to be implemented with rigour and consistency.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have successfully focused on ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils, and this has contributed to the creation of a vigilant and transparent culture of safeguarding. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. All staff and governors have had relevant safeguarding training which is regularly updated. Staff are clear that no concern is too small to report, and all concerns are followed up methodically. Effective use is made of an electronic system of collating and storing records. Staff make referrals to external agencies that are timely and appropriate. Information is shared effectively with parents when it is appropriate, and constructive working relationships with other agencies help to keep pupils safe. Links with agencies concerned with mental well-being are particularly well developed.

Opportunities for developing pupils' understanding of how to stay safe are successfully threaded through the curriculum. These are found in assemblies, tutorial periods and lessons throughout the school. This includes helping pupils to deal with any risks they may routinely face, including the use of the internet and social networking sites. A very large majority of pupils and parents say that pupils feel very safe at the school. Pupils are very confident that there are adults at school they can talk to if they need advice and that the school will deal effectively with any concerns they report.

Inspection findings

- Between 2016 and 2017, the progress made by all pupils overall at key stage 4 improved. The progress made by disadvantaged pupils in English and mathematics also improved. However, the overall progress made by disadvantaged pupils did not improve and remained too low compared to other pupils nationally.
- My first line of enquiry was therefore to investigate how successfully the school was improving the progress of disadvantaged pupils. School leaders accept that, over time, the teaching of disadvantaged pupils has not been as strong as it should have been. This has meant that, despite many recent improvements, there has not been a sufficient opportunity to compensate completely for previous weaknesses and to see the impact on pupils' key stage 4 results.
- School leaders were able to explain a wide range of strategies which have been put in place to increase the rate of progress for disadvantaged pupils across all year groups. Even before they join the school, disadvantaged pupils attend a summer school at the end of Year 6 to prepare them. Detailed information is collated and disseminated to staff about every disadvantaged pupil. These strategy sheets ('hints and tips') help teachers plan to overcome each pupil's individual barriers to learning. The school has effectively improved communication with the parents of disadvantaged pupils so, for example, their attendance at parents' evenings has risen greatly.
- Teachers prioritise the needs of disadvantaged pupils when they plan lessons, design seating plans, mark books and ask questions. Extra support is provided for disadvantaged pupils who need to catch up outside of normal lessons. School sixth-form students are involved in delivering these interventions. The school's own performance information suggests that disadvantaged pupils are now catching up, both during key stage 4 and lower down the school. Evidence gathered during this inspection was consistent with this evaluation.
- My second line of enquiry was to investigate how the school is working to ensure that pupils of all abilities make really strong progress. This is because, in 2017, those pupils who joined the school with attainment which was below the national average did not make as much progress overall as those with higher starting points.
- The 2017 results do not fully reflect the achievements of pupils with low prior attainment. The group was very small and most within this group achieved well. The school's assessment information about pupils currently in the school shows that low prior-attaining pupils are making strong progress. Teachers plan effectively to meet the individual needs of all pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. School leaders are currently investigating how the curriculum could be further broadened at both key stages 4 and 5 to strengthen this provision and accelerate progress even further.
- My final line of enquiry was to investigate how successfully the school is working to eliminate the remaining inconsistencies in outcomes between different subject departments. In 2017, pupils made progress in some subjects at key stage 4 which was significantly greater than that made by pupils nationally, for example

in English and modern foreign languages. However, in other subjects, such as some of the optional 'open element' subjects, progress was weaker than that found nationally.

- School leaders were able to explain a range of strategies which have been put in place to promote consistently positive outcomes across all subjects. They have strengthened their systems of quality assurance. These involve a thorough programme of departmental reviews, including lesson observation and work scrutiny, and the systematic analysis of information about pupils' performance. The information gathered has helped leaders shape a programme of training which is meticulously tailored to the specific needs of individual staff.
- The school's own performance information suggests that most previously underperforming subjects are now catching up across all key stages. However, some unevenness in performance still remains.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils by routinely evaluating and sharpening the strategies which are in place
- the progress made in every subject at key stage 4 is consistently above the national average for that subject.

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

Paul Lawrence
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, teachers, governors and various groups of pupils. We observed pupils' learning in a series of short visits to a number of lessons, and all of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team.

We scrutinised a range of school documentation, including policies, the school's self-evaluation, the school's improvement plan, safeguarding records and information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance.

We considered the views expressed in 366 responses by parents to Ofsted's online

questionnaire, Parent View, including 339 free-text responses, together with 508 questionnaires returned by pupils and 85 returned by school staff.