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Mr Simon Pullen
Headteacher
The Royal Harbour Academy
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Dear Mr Pullen

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of The Royal Harbour Academy

Following my visit to your school on 6 February 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in July 2018. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I met with you, senior leaders and groups of subject leaders and pupils. I also met with two governors and spoke to the chair of the governing body on the telephone. I met with the chief executive officer of the Coastal Academies Trust (CAT) and two senior leaders from another school in the trust, who are providing support for the school. I met a representative from the local authority and spoke to another on the telephone. I visited lessons with an assistant headteacher at both the lower and upper school sites. I reviewed documents provided by school leaders, and other documents from the school website. These included the school's self-evaluation, governors' minutes and notes of visits, the pupil premium strategy, records of the monitoring of teaching and information about pupils' performance and attendance. Other documentation scrutinised included the notes of visit by school-improvement advisers from the local authority and the externally commissioned reviews of the school's use of pupil premium

funding and governance. The local authority's statement of action, which acts as the school's improvement plan, was evaluated. I also saw other plans presented by school leaders.

Context

Two senior leaders left their posts in the summer 2018. A new assistant headteacher joined the school in January 2019, having previously supported the school as a leader within another CAT school. Several other staff left in the summer. Teaching posts have been filled mainly with subject specialists and some capable subject leaders have been appointed. The chair of the governing body retired in summer 2018 and the vice chair was promptly voted as chair. Three new governors have been appointed.

The academy order enabling CAT to bring The Royal Harbour Academy into its multi-academy trust has not yet been enacted. The school remains an 'associate member' of CAT, which continues to provide support. As a foundation school, the school is the legal responsibility of the local authority. Kent County Council retain oversight of the monitoring and evaluation of the statement of action and have recently contracted CAT to be accountable to them for the school's effectiveness.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Since September, leaders have provided greater clarity than previously of expectations for pupils' behaviour and how staff should structure lessons. These consistent messages have steadied the school, which has a purposeful atmosphere at both the lower- and upper-school sites. The headteacher has led the change in culture to one of openness and trust among staff, who in turn support leaders' vision. Pupils report that the school feels calmer, with more focused learning during lessons and less low-level disruption than was the case previously.

Drawing on expertise within CAT, leaders acted decisively to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Assessment information about what pupils know and understand is now used more effectively to identify pupils' starting points for new learning and to spot gaps and misconceptions. This information is expected to be used to plan lessons pitched at the right level, and, where necessary, provide interventions to help pupils catch up. In addition, a new strategy for teaching has been introduced across the school which builds challenge into lessons, based on raised expectations of what pupils can achieve.

Leaders carry out systematic monitoring to check how consistently these strategies are used in lessons and to identify teachers' further training needs. Monitoring information shows a steady increase in the proportion of teaching that meets leaders' expectations. Pupils find the structured approach to lessons helpful and note that teachers regularly expect challenging work to be tackled. However, these teaching practices are at a relatively early stage of implementation. Both pupils and

leaders describe some remaining variability throughout the school. Although there are positive signs of improvements in pupils' work, it is too early to show sustained impact on the progress made by pupils across the school. In addition, there is a legacy of underachievement to make up, due to previously weak teaching.

Staff benefit from a comprehensive programme of professional development, including visiting other schools in the trust and attending joint training events. This provision is supplemented by the regular sharing of good practice within the school. The prevailing transparency among staff means that ideas which work well in this school are celebrated, difficulties are aired, and possible responses shared.

Leaders present a clear rationale for the innovative curriculum that they introduced for Year 7 in September 2018. Using expertise from the trust's primary school and considering the needs of the pupils joining Year 7, the curriculum is designed to provide a smooth transition into secondary school. A limited number of teachers provide consistency across several subjects and the Year 7 pupils say they find this less daunting than lots of different teachers at once. The teaching methodology resembles that found in primary schools but also draws on secondary subject specialist experience. A determination to improve pupils' spoken and written vocabulary underpins the curriculum. Rightly, leaders recognise the importance of helping pupils throughout the school to use subject-specific vocabulary to explain their thinking precisely. Steps have already been taken to address the identified deficiencies in pupils' vocabulary and staff training is underway to promote this further.

2018 provisional GCSE examination results show some improvement on those of 2017, but pupils' overall progress remained well below average. The school's performance information shows that current Year 11 pupils are on track to reach higher levels of attainment this year. Dedicated staff offer Year 11 pupils a wide range of extra classes to help them overcome difficulties and to further improve their standard of their work. Staff analyse assessment information thoroughly and track the progress of groups of pupils closely. Leaders acknowledge that more needs to be done to raise the achievement of the most able pupils. Leaders' over-reliance on attainment data from the tests carried out at the end of pupils' primary school may contribute to low expectations of some of the most able pupils, who underachieved at the end of Year 6. This applies particularly to pupils who speak English as an additional language and to disadvantaged pupils.

Subject leaders explain convincingly how improvements in the use of assessment information, clear guidance about lessons structure, and new staff appointments have had a positive impact. They appreciate the opportunities to share experiences with leaders in other trust schools. They feel listened to by senior leaders, and well supported, but also appropriately challenged.

Leaders are now addressing with greater urgency the underperformance of disadvantaged pupils. There is a greater awareness among staff of the need to help

these pupils make rapid progress from often-low starting points. An externally commissioned pupil premium review took place in January and noted the increase in the tracking of disadvantaged pupils by leaders and governors. However, the review unhelpfully perpetuated the use of the 'gap' in performance between disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils in the school. This measure is not a reliable way of analysing pupils' progress. Instead, leaders should consider the progress made by disadvantaged pupils with that made nationally by other pupils with similar starting points. The pupil premium review also failed to note that the information published online about the school's use of the pupil premium does not comply with the requirements of the Department for Education for maintained schools. Leaders do not carefully enough identify the main barriers to educational achievement faced by disadvantaged pupils at the school, to help direct how best to spend the pupil premium funding to overcome these barriers.

Pupils' attendance is improving but remains below the national average for secondary schools.

The governance of the school has been strengthened. Following the section 5 inspection, a new chair of the governing body was quickly appointed. Under his direction, membership of the governing body has changed, including the appointment of three governors with relevant experience and expertise. Systems to review the school's effectiveness are in place, including regular visits to the school. A useful external review of governance acknowledged the improvements already underway and provided pertinent recommendations for further development.

Leaders receive external support from CAT and the local authority. As described above, collaboration between schools in the trust is helping staff at The Royal Harbour Academy to improve their practice. The chief executive officer of the trust works closely with the headteacher and holds him to account effectively. Officers from the local authority are monitoring the implementation of the statement of action regularly and carefully. As the changes made at the school become embedded, school leaders must focus less on teachers' actions and more on the impact on pupils' learning and progress. The statement of action currently serves as the school's main improvement plan. Over time, fresh, robust self-evaluation by leaders and governors should lead to revision of these plans. Leaders have already identified new priorities based on their vision for the curriculum.

Overall, leaders have enhanced the culture and introduced effective systems to deliver the necessary improvements at the school. Early signs are positive, but there is still much to do to enable pupils to achieve well.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plans are fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Kent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector