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Mr Martin Bonner
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Dear Mr Bonner

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Houghton Regis Academy

Following my visit to your school on 6 March 2017, 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 September 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

At its section 5 inspection, before the one that took place in 2016, the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement, identified at the recent section 5 inspection, in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- Continue to improve the consistency of the quality of teaching and learning, across subjects and different groups of pupils, by:
 - matching the findings from lesson observations more closely with assessment information and reviews of pupils' work in books.
- Strengthen further the work of middle leaders, so that they:
 - are clear about the contribution their subject areas make to whole school improvement

- enable all pupils to achieve as well as they can in their areas of responsibility.
- Ensure that the work to improve pupils' attendance is rigorous and sustained, so that attendance, for all groups, is at least in line with the national average and that persistent absence continues to reduce.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, pupils, staff, and a representative of the school's advisory council, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also spoke, by telephone, with the director responsible for the quality of education provision across the Greenwood Academies Trust. In addition, I reviewed a wide range of documents, policies and other related information, including information associated with safeguarding and child protection. The school's self-evaluation and improvement plan was considered alongside the evidence gathered on the inspection day. Together with you, I observed teaching and learning in lessons, looked at pupils' books and spoke to them about their work.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the role of the attendance officer has been reinstated. In addition, a data manager has been appointed to oversee the collection and dissemination of the school's assessment information. These recent appointments underpin senior leaders' commitment to securing and sustaining improvement over time.

Main findings

You, your senior leaders and the trust have taken steps to secure an improvement-planning process that makes ensuring that all pupils receive a good standard of education a priority. The plan is focused on the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Together with the trust, you are making sure that improvement actions are subject to appropriate monitoring and review to check that they are working. Although your evaluations of the school's performance are accurate, the self-evaluation document itself is not yet fully developed to include clear stages and timescales, set against measurable targets, by which you will achieve your aims.

The trust board has a clear strategic role in shaping improvement plans and ensuring that they are implemented effectively. In order to address the issues identified at the previous inspection, board members have strengthened procedures for holding you and other senior leaders to account for the school's performance. Recent changes to the extent of the information they require, most importantly about pupils' progress, are securing greater rigour and transparency. Your middle leaders told me that they value the contribution of the trust-wide subject-specialist

advisers who work with them. They feel that the advisers offer an appropriately balanced programme of support and challenge to help them to improve outcomes for pupils in their areas of responsibility.

In our discussions, we considered the 2016 examination outcomes which fell short of national expectations for pupils at the end of key stage 4. In particular, there were differences in progress between different groups of pupils, such as boys and girls, and between disadvantaged pupils and other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. This is a key focus of the improvement work underway.

In September 2016, the inspection highlighted weaknesses in the school's systems for monitoring the in-year progress of different groups of pupils. To address this weakness, an experienced data manager has now been appointed. This appointment has transformed the systems for the collection of assessment information and has made significant improvements to the accuracy of the tracking of pupils' progress. As a result, senior leaders and teaching staff are better equipped to identify when pupils are falling behind and to ensure that appropriate support is in place.

A new senior leader has overall responsibility for pupils' achievement and, consequently, maintains oversight of subject leaders' performance in securing rapid improvement. There is now targeted intervention and support for teachers' professional development. This arises from regular reviews of the quality of teaching and learning, through lesson observations linked to more accurate assessment information and the checking of pupils' work. You rightly acknowledge the school remains on the journey to secure good teaching over time and that leads to good outcomes for all pupil groups. You know that the variations in the rates of pupils' progress, including for disadvantaged, the most able and between boys and girls, across subjects and year groups, are still too wide. The most able pupils are not being challenged regularly enough in lessons to do as well as they can.

Nevertheless, teaching and expectations of what pupils can achieve are beginning to improve. There are early signs that pupils are making better progress from their different starting points. Teachers' planning is more closely matched to pupils' needs because assessments are regular and more accurate. A revised programme of 'mock' examinations is helping teachers to identify any gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding so that appropriate interventions are secured quickly.

The requirement for teachers to apply the school's marking policy is being reinforced across the school. Recent checks show that teachers are increasingly consistent in their approach to using this. Year 7 pupils who join the secondary stage with reading skills below age-related expectations are supported with extra tuition to help them to catch up. A new scheme has been identified to enhance this support further. The associated training for staff will take place this term. The previous inspection reported that pupils' attendance was significantly below the national average. Currently, as a result of raised expectations, and the work of the

recently appointed attendance officer, pupils attend school more regularly and persistent absence is beginning to reduce. However, overall attendance is still too low. The incidences of pupils arriving late to their lessons are less frequent because of teachers' improved consistency in the application of the expected sanctions. The implementation of a new innovative, online system is effective in giving parents 'real time' updates about pupils' progress and also in sharing any concerns about pupils' behaviour.

It was pleasing to note the good working relationships established between staff and pupils, in particular the good contribution these relationships make to the positive behaviour I saw, much of the time, during my visit. However, the boisterous behaviour of a few pupils at lunchtime, in outside areas of the school, was not addressed as quickly as it could have been by staff. Some pupils feel that behaviour across the school is not as good as it should be.

All Year 11 pupils have a mentor assigned from the leadership team to provide academic and pastoral support. This is helping to ensure that pupils are kept on track and equipped appropriately to progress to the next phase in their education and/or training. The differences in pupils' progress, across different groups, are beginning to diminish but not rapidly enough at this stage.

Safeguarding arrangements are appropriate and continue to be effective.

External support

The school draws effectively on the support available. This includes the work of the subject specialist advisers and a school improvement partner, commissioned by the trust, to support you in raising standards. Collaborative arrangements with other schools, including with the trust's 'learning alliance' schools, to share good practice and continuous professional development, are valued by your team. Nevertheless, we agreed that teachers do not yet have enough opportunities to observe outstanding teaching, learning and assessment. This is exacerbated by limitations in the school's capacity to release staff because of ongoing difficulties in teacher recruitment.

I am copying this letter to the chief executive of the Greenwood Academies Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick
Her Majesty's Inspector