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Ms Monica Austin
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Austin

Short inspection of Ashcroft High School

Following my visit to the school on 16 January 2018 with Paul O'Shea, Ofsted Inspector and Andrew Maher, 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 October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

You provide highly effective, visionary leadership that is rooted in a passion for every pupil to achieve their very best. The ethos you promote is based on the school being 'one large family', having high aspirations for all pupils.

Since the previous inspection, you and your senior leaders have maintained a strong focus on implementing sustainable improvement. You are very clear that, for your school, quick fixes are not the answer. Through your chosen strategy to develop a coaching programme that makes the most of your staff's strengths and supports their areas to develop, you have successfully created a whole-school culture where pupils' needs are at the heart of all decision-making.

Pupils are proud of their school. They show maturity around the school and have an in-depth understanding of the school's aims to be 'respectful, responsible and resilient' in their day-to-day school life. For example, pupils have many opportunities to take on responsibility as prefects, sports and house captains, which you encourage. This is helping pupils to gain skills that will readily prepare them for life in the wider society.

Pupils achieve well at Ashcroft High School because of your ambition to make sure that they all make good progress. This is resulting in disadvantaged pupils, those

pupils who speak English as an additional language and lower-attaining pupils all making good or better progress during their time with you. This is further verified because generally, pupils enter the school with the knowledge and skills below that of pupils of the same age. In 2017, overall results show pupils' attainment was average. This represents pupils making good progress from their starting points.

You have identified that there are still areas to improve. You and leaders were disappointed, as were some parents, governors and pupils, with the 2017 GCSE results in English and humanities. Leaders' forensic analysis of the results has been quick. Actions have been taken to support areas to develop and manage underperformance. As a result of your rapid intervention, assessment information shows that the improvements you have undertaken are already making a difference in English and humanities.

Pupils behave well in and out of lessons. The previous inspection stated that pupils' attitudes were good and this has been maintained. Pupils are able to explain clearly how they are supported to do well in lessons. Pupils value the rewards and responsibilities they are afforded and feel that the pastoral 'house system' cares for them well. This was confirmed when inspectors heard pupils debating among themselves how they could improve their chances of receiving more rewards for attendance and behaviour.

Pupils are motivated to do well, and this is reflected in the way they work together and with their teachers. The school's own parent, staff and pupil surveys, along with Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, are, in the main, very positive. While they reflect the views of a small minority who have mixed views about behaviour, you and your staff are working hard to improve the information that parents receive so they feel more informed. An example of this is your successful web-based system. This is providing more accurate up-to-date information for parents.

Your governors provide effective challenge and support. They understand the school very well and take opportunities to visit the school and meet with parents. Governors understand the strengths of the school and where there is a need to improve. They are clear about the need to make improvements in humanities, English, and also the outcomes for the most able pupils. Governors share your passion for further developing a school that gives pupils a suite of qualifications that will serve them well after leaving school.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. This is demonstrated in your well-focused improvement and development plans that you and your leaders closely monitor and regularly review to ascertain progress. Consequently, as was recommended in the previous inspection, you have successfully focused on increasing the proportion of outstanding teaching and learning and increasingly raised achievement for disadvantaged pupils in mathematics.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team, including governors, have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Leaders have undertaken all of the statutory checks on staff and these are scrutinised regularly by the business manager, headteacher and the safeguarding governor.

Every member of your senior team is trained as a safeguarding leader. They have a wide range of specialist expertise and lead in-school training for staff and pupils as well as providing expert help to other schools. All safeguarding training is recorded and monitored effectively to ensure that all staff have the most up-to-date information and a secure knowledge and understanding of how to ensure that pupils are kept safe.

Pupils enjoy school and say that they feel safe because of the high levels of care they receive, particularly in their 'pastoral houses'. Pupils explained how the house leaders offer a range of opportunities for them to participate in learning and debating how to keep safe, both in school and within the wider society. Additionally, children looked after, and those who are disadvantaged, are monitored and supported closely and they make good progress in their studies overall. As a result, pupils are safe and well cared for.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, I discussed with you a number of lines of enquiry to ascertain whether the school remains good.
- My first focus was centred on the dip in English results in 2017, and what the school was doing to improve this. You have learned from the results as they were not typical of the school's usual performance in English over time. Leaders have analysed the outcomes and considered what this indicated about the gaps in pupils' learning. You identified that there were issues of pupil underperformance in some aspects of unseen text analysis in the examination that had a significant impact on achievement. There was also some debate as to the accuracy of examination marking. However, you and your team have used the dip in outcomes as a driver to make sustained and rapid improvement for current pupils.
- You have reviewed the quality of teaching, learning and assessment to develop a plan that ensures that teachers focus on aspects that will make a difference to the progress pupils make. When your senior leader and I visited the Year 11 classes, we saw that some aspects of this plan were already having an impact, for example in the ways that teachers were using examination assessment objectives to plan lessons and feedback to pupils. As a result of this, pupils are able to explain what they have achieved and how they can improve their understanding, knowledge and skills.
- Pupils' work showed that they are now making good progress. You have engaged with other schools to share ideas and check work, which is helping leaders to secure accuracy in their assessments.

- A second line of enquiry was looking at how leaders are managing the underperformance in humanities subjects at key stage 4. This was because in 2017 outcomes were low, reflecting that pupils were not making the progress they should.
- Staffing is now more stable in humanities. This is resulting in more focused teamwork being undertaken. Pupils' progress is monitored more closely by leaders and teachers to ensure that support is more bespoke for individuals' needs. Evidence in pupils' books shows that the progress pupils have made from their starting points is now good. Additionally, pupils are being given more opportunities to apply their different subject skills to other curriculum areas. For example, recently there was a joint field trip for art and geography students that enabled pupils to apply skills in this way.
- The use of the website is encouraging pupils to develop independent lines of enquiry and deepen their knowledge, skills and understanding of key concepts in humanities. You explained to me that lesson plans and resources are shared with pupils and parents, so they can use these at home. This is further supporting parents to help pupils achieve the best they can. Many of the improvements in humanities are newly implemented this academic year. While current assessment information shows there is evidence of progress being made, you acknowledge that for some aspects, more time is needed for the work to have a full impact upon pupil outcomes.
- Another focus during this inspection was looking at the achievement of the most able pupils. The most able pupils have not achieved as well as others in recent years in some key subject areas. Leaders have responded positively and actively to focus all departments on 'teaching to the top', which is an initiative to challenge pupils of all abilities, including the most able.
- Pupils are now more responsible for improving their own learning. Your chosen approach of introducing personal-learning reviews is enabling pupils to reflect upon how they need to improve. Pupils said that they value this opportunity because they recognise there is a focus on challenging them and they think that work in class is planned to provide them with the chance to deepen their learning. In line with this, the quality of teachers' feedback is now more effective. Pupils' work shows that teachers are using feedback to provide challenge for pupils with opportunities to extend and deepen their learning further. You are aware that there is more work to be done to ensure that this is consistent. For example, some key stage 3 pupils stated that there was not always the same level of challenge in Years 8 and 9.
- The final aspect I explored was how the school is improving attendance, reducing persistent absence and exclusions. You are aware that attendance is a little lower than the national averages and that persistent absence increased significantly last year. Fixed-term exclusions are slightly higher than the national average, but you have made improvements, and this is reducing the number of repeat exclusions. Your leaders have already identified the need to continue to make improvements so that all pupils attend school regularly.
- Building relationships with families, using translators and hosting face-to-face meetings and social events in school are all strategies being used successfully to

help support good attendance. These focus on building positive relationships with families. Your ethos is that the 'house pastoral system' is at the heart of the school and central to making a difference. You believe the houses are successful because pastoral leaders work with smaller numbers of pupils and parents and know them well. Although you know that you need to improve the monitoring of attendance further, particularly relating to persistent absence and exclusions, the current attendance information you shared with inspectors demonstrates that this work is making a positive difference.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- you persist with the work to improve outcomes in English and humanities rapidly, ensuring that assessment continues to be more accurate and this information is used consistently and precisely by teachers to support pupils making better progress
- most-able pupils are challenged and supported by teachers to improve their achievement further from their starting points
- you continue the work to improve attendance, especially for those pupils who are persistently absent, so that pupils attend school more regularly.

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

Yours sincerely

Russell Ayling
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, we met with you, senior leaders, middle leaders, other school staff, the vice-chair and other representatives from the governing body, a representative from the local authority and groups of pupils. Inspectors made short visits to observe lessons and looked at pupils' work with senior leaders across a range of subjects and year groups. We reviewed documents about school improvement and self-evaluation, safeguarding, including the single central record, child protection files and staff training. Additionally, we considered 71 responses to Ofsted's Parent View, feedback to the team from a parent and the results of the school's independent surveys completed recently by 109 parents, 1,079 pupils and all 106 staff.