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Mr David Blow
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Blow

Short inspection of The Ashcombe School

Following my visit to the school on 8 January 2019 with Ofsted inspectors Colin Lankester and Hugh Betterton, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in January 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The Ashcombe School's vision for pupils' social and academic success is evident throughout the school. Parents and carers are very positive about the quality of education provided to pupils. For example, in Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View, parents commented on the 'utterly brilliant staff', the 'excellent facilities' and the 'good quality of education'. One parent's comment that the school has 'dedicated, enthusiastic, skilled staff who are supported by a fabulous senior leadership team' was echoed by many others.

Although the school has experienced changes to its leadership, the commitment of leaders, including that of governors, has ensured that the focus on improvement has not altered. Your vision for an academic curriculum, supported by high-quality teaching and learning, that prepares pupils well for life in 21st century Britain is shared by all staff at the school. You have embedded effective monitoring and support systems that ensure strong teaching, learning and assessment. Staff feel very well supported and embrace evidence-based research to strengthen their teaching.

Governors at The Ashcombe School bring a breadth of expertise to their roles, enabling them to provide critical challenge and support. Through regular visits and meetings with staff and pupils, they know the school very well. The governing body is led well and ensures that governors maintain a clear focus on the school's improvement priorities.

Pupils' attitudes towards learning are very positive. Pupils are attentive and responsive in equal measure in lessons. As a result, there is a very harmonious learning atmosphere. Pupils collaborate well to strengthen their understanding of a range of concepts and ideas. The curriculum encourages pupils to develop their thinking about the world and the importance of democracy, free speech and tolerance. The school council, for example, has an important role in driving improvements at the school. The council campaigned for an end to the use of plastic in the school canteens, and this is currently being implemented.

You judge mathematics and humanities to be particular strengths of the school. Through sequential learning, pupils develop strong skills, knowledge and understanding. For example, inspectors observed Year 10 pupils debating the importance of a breadth of historical figures in the history of medicine with strong prior knowledge.

You have a clear, firm vision regarding the importance of an academic curriculum. Consequently, you and your leadership team take swift action to ensure improvements where required. For example, your focus on improving pupils' progress in physical education and food technology has resulted in increased pupil engagement and improvements in current progress and attainment. However, you recognise that there are areas for improvement. For example, you acknowledge that disadvantaged pupils do not make as much progress or attain as well in many areas of the curriculum as other pupils nationally. You also recognise that the attendance of disadvantaged pupils was below the national figure in 2017 and 2018.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, are vigilant about keeping pupils physically, socially and emotionally safe at the school. Pupils learn about how to keep safe when on the internet and the importance of doing so. Pupils spoke very positively about how staff help to keep them safe. For example, pupils told inspectors of how they could talk to any member of staff if they had an issue that concerned them.

Leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements and are effective. Safeguarding documentation is maintained securely, and any concerns about pupils are addressed appropriately and swiftly. Checks regarding the suitability of adults to work with pupils are recorded meticulously. Staff attend regular safeguarding training and are alert to safeguarding concerns. Leaders and staff are alert to potential mental health issues raised by social media and respond swiftly to pupils' concerns.

Inspection findings

- This inspection's first line of enquiry focused on how leaders ensure that disadvantaged pupils maintain improvements in the rates of progress that they make in a range of subjects by the end of key stage 4. In 2016 and 2017, disadvantaged pupils made significantly slower rates of progress than other pupils nationally. However, in 2018, disadvantaged pupils' progress rates

improved, although their attainment across the curriculum including in English and mathematics continued to be lower than that of other pupils nationally. You explained how you and other leaders have reviewed whole-school approaches to improving the achievements of disadvantaged pupils. For example, you have identified the role of aspiration in improving pupils' academic progress. As a result, pupils receive helpful careers guidance, enabling them to make informed choices about their education throughout their time at school. Children looked after commented very positively on the careers guidance that they had experienced at the school.

- On visiting lessons, inspectors observed many disadvantaged pupils making strong progress. For example, through bespoke support adapted to suit pupils' learning styles and social and emotional needs, an inspector observed Year 10 pupils making strong progress in mathematics. However, such strong progress is not consistent in every area of the curriculum. The barriers faced by disadvantaged pupils do not consistently inform teachers' planning and teaching and learning. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is below the national average for secondary schools. Consequently, many disadvantaged pupils miss critical lessons that would enable them to make the rapid progress required to attain at least in line with pupils nationally across the curriculum.
- My second line of enquiry was about how leaders are improving outcomes for pupils in the open element subjects at the end of key stage 4. This was because pupils' rates of progress overall were below the national averages in 2018 for this group of subjects. Leaders have established a very effective GCSE examination-focused curriculum that both challenges and enthuses pupils. Pupils told inspectors how much they enjoyed coming to school to learn because teachers made 'lessons fun' and 'accessible'. Consequently, pupils make strong progress in these subjects. For example, inspectors observed a Year 9 music lesson where pupils developed swiftly their knowledge, skills and understanding about the impact of musical notation on an audience. Inspectors observed pupils in a Year 8 drama lesson developing the use of physical movement to mirror human emotions highly effectively.
- Leaders have a highly ethical approach to the curriculum, placing pupils' needs and interests at the centre of its design. Through well-structured support from the senior leadership team, subject leaders are enabled to develop teaching and learning approaches so that pupils make strong progress. Additionally, teachers in all subject areas focus on developing pupils' understanding and use of subject-specific language so that they can articulate their ideas knowledgeably. Leaders have established a programme of teaching and learning focused on developing the role of questioning in lessons. As a result, inspectors observed teachers using a range of questioning approaches that helped to extend pupils' understanding.
- The third line of enquiry focused on how leaders have ensured that students in the sixth form continue to make strong progress and attain well. Leaders have devised a curriculum which places students at its very heart. The GCSE examination-focused academic curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 prepares students very well for sixth-form study. Students told inspectors how much they valued the opportunities offered by the sixth form.

- The proportion of students who attain grade 4 and above in GCSE English and mathematics is well above the national average at sixth form. Leaders adapt the curriculum to suit the needs of students. For example, leaders have successfully established a vocational course that prepares students for the world of work. Students achieve well above the national average in this course. Consequently, the proportion of students who go on to further education, employment or training post sixth form is high. In addition to developing strong independent learning skills and attaining well at A level, students have a breadth of extra-curricular opportunities. For example, students visit China and Uganda to broaden their understanding of other cultures.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers address the learning needs of disadvantaged pupils at key stage 3 and key stage 4 so that:
 - they make rapid progress to attain at least in line with other pupils nationally in all areas of the curriculum
- disadvantaged pupils attend school regularly and their attendance is at least in line with the national average for secondary schools so that:
 - they do not miss critical lessons that will help them to make rapid progress and attain at least in line with other pupils nationally.

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

Yours sincerely

Susan Aykin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

For this inspection, we had meetings with you, other senior leaders and middle leaders. I had a meeting with three governors. Inspectors spoke with pupils informally in classrooms and when walking around the school's site. I also met formally with a group of 18 pupils to gather their views about the school. Inspectors visited a range of lessons to look at pupils' learning across all phases and carried out a separate scrutiny of pupils' work.

Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined, along with the record of recruitment checks carried out on all adults working at the school. A

range of documentation was looked at, including: the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans; information relating to pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour; the minutes of governors' meetings; and curriculum plans. I considered the views of 253 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View, including free-text comments. I also considered the views of 59 members of staff.