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Mr Dominic Curran
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Curran

Short inspection of Aston Academy

Following my visit to the school on 13 June 2018 with Barbara O'Brien and Nicholas Horn, Ofsted Inspectors, 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 February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your recent appointment, you have developed a culture and ethos within the school that pushes all pupils to be 'the best they can be'. It is clear from the lessons that inspectors visited that your teachers support this vision because they hold high expectation and aspirations for their pupils and ensure they are regularly challenged in their work. As a result, pupils in the school make good progress.

You have ensured that leaders are constantly evaluating the school's effectiveness. As a result, you have sustained ongoing improvement by swiftly identifying areas for development and deploying successful strategies to secure success. For example, you rightly recognised that the progress that pupils made in English needed to improve. Leaders have been effective in developing the curriculum in English so that pupils are challenged and receive targeted support centred on their needs. As a result, the progress that pupils now make in English has improved and is good across all key stages.

Since the last inspection, all leaders have been working hard to embed a culture of high expectations and to improve the behaviour of all pupils. The actions of leaders and teachers at all levels have had a positive effect on the culture of the school.

Your pupils value and show respect and tolerance for each other, your staff and the school building because of the culture you have developed. Pupils are rarely off task in lessons and report that they enjoy their lessons. As a result of this ethos, behaviour in the school is good, the number of fixed-term exclusions has decreased, and more pupils are meeting the challenging targets that you set for them.

Your own strong leadership has been supported by governors and Aston Community Education Trust. Governors have a clear knowledge of how well the school is doing and are given clear responsibilities by the trust to bring necessary improvements. Governors work closely with school leaders and hold them to account effectively. The trust has developed strategic partnerships across primary and secondary phases in core curriculum areas and, as a result, teachers have a greater understanding of the 3 to 19 curriculum. Teachers can therefore build rapidly on prior learning. This is clear to see in the good progress that pupils are making.

You have a shared vision with middle leaders that ensures a sustained focus on robust and regular assessment systems that centre upon the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. You have been successful in improving pupils' progress through regular meetings with senior and middle leaders that ensure that each pupil receives targeted support centred on their needs. Your leadership is particularly effective due to the honest and thorough approach leaders take in evaluating the impact of the interventions. This means that pupils' progress is supported further. However, you recognise that the consistency of this approach is something for your leadership team to address.

Safeguarding is effective.

You ensure that safeguarding at the school is effective through clear and robust processes and procedures that you ensure staff and governors understand, including those new to the school. It is clear that you have developed a strong safeguarding culture that permeates all areas of the school to protect all pupils, but in particular those learners that are vulnerable or face disadvantage. Your leaders are proactive in their work with external agencies prior to pupils starting at your school to ensure that appropriate support strategies are put into place swiftly. As a result, your leaders and teachers know their pupils very well, which results in pupils feeling safe and happy at the school. Pupils are confident that staff will deal effectively with any problems they might have.

Your staff deal swiftly and effectively with any incidents and concerns to make sure they do not lead to a pupil being endangered. Your staff have a detailed knowledge of how to recognise signs of concern, such as neglect or abuse, which is shown through effective use of your referral policies. This means that pupils are given the support they need. The school has a strong knowledge of particular risks that pupils may face, and your leaders plan for this in a programme from Year 7 through to the sixth form. This is effective; pupils say that the school makes them aware of how to keep themselves safe against potential risks, such as drug and alcohol abuse and child sexual exploitation.

You and your leaders have worked effectively to reduce the number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions and the number of fixed-term exclusions is now well below the national average. Any decision taken to permanently exclude a pupil is taken appropriately and such decisions follow extensive interventions and appropriate support strategies to keep pupils in school.

Inspection findings

- You were rightly concerned with the historical outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and recognised that improvement in this area is a challenge for the school. You effectively evaluated the funding you receive to support disadvantaged pupils and identified a 'faculty champion' for the disadvantaged across curriculum areas. By appointing leaders across the school that relentlessly focus on the needs of the disadvantaged pupils, teachers are better supported in helping pupils overcome the barriers they face. For example, in science pupils are provided with revision guides, highlighters and mini whiteboards to support their revision at home. As a result, more pupils, including those that are disadvantaged, are meeting their challenging target grades in many subjects. You recognise that this approach is not as effective as it could be because it is not consistently applied across all curriculum areas.
- Current data suggests that outcomes for the most able pupils are improving as a result of the whole-school approach taken to increase the level of challenge in all lessons. You were rightly concerned about this group and have begun to take steps to improve their outcomes. An example of this was seen through initiatives such as 'struggle time': this is where students are challenged to complete difficult tasks independently. In the lessons where this was seen, for example in science and history, it was effective in challenging students to make connections in their learning over time and apply this to unknown situations. However, you agree that the impact of these approaches is not yet consistent across the curriculum and that you and other leaders will continue to focus on improving the provision for the most able pupils.
- You should feel a sense of professional pride in the work that you and other leaders have undertaken in English over the past academic year, due to the rapid improvement that has taken place. With the support of the trust, you have redesigned the curriculum to ensure that skills and knowledge that pupils acquire in primary school are rapidly built upon in key stage 3. The impact of this was clear in the lessons which inspectors observed and in the work produced in books. Leaders effectively evaluated the performance of Year 11 pupils last year in order to develop teachers' knowledge and confidence in the challenges of assessing accurately for new GCSE specifications. Leaders also monitor the performance and progress of pupils in English regularly and develop actions that both challenge and support pupils appropriately. For example, in a Year 9 English lesson, inspectors saw that pupils were challenged in the development of vocabulary and use of higher-order thinking skills. As a result of all of this extensive work, leaders at all levels are confident that pupils are making good progress in English.

- You and other leaders have a clear vision for the curriculum: you want the curriculum to challenge pupils to be the best they can be and to broaden understanding of cultures and the wider world. Therefore, a higher proportion of pupils are entered for EBacc subjects compared to the national average. You rightly evaluated that the progress that pupils were making in these subjects was not good enough and that improvement in this area was a priority for the school. Through evaluation, you recognised that the curriculum needed to change because some pupils had not been fully engaged in some subjects, for example languages. You carefully remodelled the curriculum for Year 9 and so you have since seen more pupils enjoying their learning. This was clear to see in a Year 9 Spanish lesson that challenged pupils to develop their reading and oracy skills for prolonged periods of time. You agree, however, that the action that has been taken to improve the progress of pupils in EBacc subjects needs to be strengthened further. It was clear that where school policies are being followed consistently in EBacc subjects, rapid progress was seen. For example, in some books of most-able pupils in geography and science, students spend time making significant improvements to the work they produce and as a result are making better progress. Leaders of the school know that this best practice needs further embedding across all EBacc subjects.
- Leadership of the sixth form is a strength of the school. In 2017, the progress of students on A-Level courses was not as strong as those studying applied general courses. Leaders have ensured that teachers carefully monitor and review the progress that their students make. As a result, students in the sixth form told inspectors that their teachers know them exceptionally well and that they provide support based upon their individual needs. The impact of this was clear to inspectors, who saw examples of how teachers support students in subjects such as psychology and physical education. In addition, leaders effectively monitor students' progress to ensure that they are on the right pathway and make appropriate changes rapidly so that students succeed in their chosen subjects. This is clear to see in the current progress students are making on A-Level courses. You and your leaders say that you would like more students to continue into the sixth form and you effectively reflect on the current curriculum. You recognise that the curriculum needs to change to further meet students' needs and you are taking actions to address this by investigating level 2 vocational provision.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers across different curriculum areas meet the needs of all pupils, particularly those that are disadvantaged and most able, to ensure they make even better progress
- they challenge how well and how consistently teachers use classroom policies and practices to ensure that all learners progress well in all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Lee Styles
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held discussions with you and other senior leaders about your plans for improvement and your evaluation of the school's effectiveness. I met with a group of middle leaders. I also had a meeting with members of the local governing body and representatives from the sponsoring trust. I met with a range of pupils from Year 8, Year 10 and Year 12. I conducted observations throughout the school with senior leaders, looking at pupils' work and observing their learning. I conducted a scrutiny of pupils' work in a range of subjects, including work produced in the sixth form. I also scrutinised a range of documents related to safeguarding, behaviour and school improvement. I considered all the responses of parents to Ofsted's online Parent View questionnaire.