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Mrs C Woodend
Headteacher
The Abbey School
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Dear Mrs Woodend

Short inspection of The Abbey School

Following my visit to the school on 21 February 2017 with Liz Maidlow, 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained a good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your leaders continue seeking to provide the best possible education for each pupil. You are well supported by the staff and a dedicated and strong governing body in your drive to achieve this. Parents are highly positive in their comments. As one said, 'I am very pleased that I selected this school for my daughter.'

Your staff promote the school's values of 'be the best you can be' very well by setting increasingly high levels of aspiration among the pupils and students in a strongly supportive environment. This creates an atmosphere where pupils and students develop as individuals, and are well prepared for life as responsible members of the community. As another parent said, 'My three sons have each thrived at The Abbey School.' Pupils and students feel very well cared for. Pupils very much enjoy the range of school clubs and rich experiences they are offered, including visits in the local area, London and abroad. There is an obvious sense of trust and mutual respect between pupils and adults.

At the last inspection, inspectors noted several strengths, including strong leadership, the quality of teaching, improving exam results, a vibrant sixth form, good behaviour and the excellent level of care and safety. Inspectors highlighted the need for leaders to increase and improve teaching further through the provision of even more challenge in lessons. They advised that teachers should provide sufficient time in lessons for pupils to find things out for themselves, and make sure

that pupils are made aware of their next steps. You have taken effective action to address these recommendations.

You have ensured that your existing teachers benefit from high-quality training and you have appointed strong teachers to the school. As a result, the level of challenge in lessons has increased. In addition, you have ensured that all pupils know and understand the next steps they need to take to improve their work.

You acknowledge that outcomes last year in some subjects, notably mathematics and science, as well as the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, were not as strong as you had hoped. You have made appropriate changes to address this. Consequently, the indications are that your more positive predictions for this year are attainable. You also recognise that improving attendance, in particular for disadvantaged pupils, is a priority for the school. You, your leadership team and your governing body are taking effective action to address this.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have established a strong culture of safeguarding that runs throughout the school. This is well supported by an effective safeguarding system that makes sure that all pupils are secure. Procedures and policies meet statutory requirements and records are detailed and of high quality.

Your designated safeguarding leader has good support from her able deputy. Leaders and governors have been appropriately trained in safer recruitment procedures. Training of staff and governors is both comprehensive and regular. For example, staff that join the school mid-year receive appropriate training, and all staff receive regular training regarding any changes to safeguarding practices as they arise, including child protection. Staff know the signs to look out for that may indicate that a pupil is at risk of harm.

Leaders work effectively with outside agencies as required, such as social services and the police, to support vulnerable pupils. Pupils say that they feel very safe in school, and this is overwhelmingly supported by the views of parents. Pupils are aware of how to stay safe when using the internet and social media. Instances of bullying are very rare. When they do arise, the staff deal with them swiftly.

Inspection findings

- During the meeting with you at the start of the day, we discussed your evaluation of the school's effectiveness and agreed the key areas we would focus on during the inspection. These included:
 - the effectiveness of safeguarding
 - the effectiveness of the steps you have taken to improve the quality of mathematics and science teaching
 - the effectiveness of the measures to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils

- the effectiveness of the provision you have made for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
 - the extent to which the sixth-form study programme components are met, and the extent to which outcomes in AS and A level subjects are improving
 - how rapidly the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who are frequently absent is improving.
- You acknowledge that pupils' progress and attainment in mathematics and science in 2016 was lower than expected. You have subsequently taken effective action to address this. Evidence from learning walks, scrutiny of pupils' work and current assessment data shows that achievement in these subjects is improving. This was seen particularly in the good progress being made currently by pupils in key stage 3. You are using a good variety of effective approaches to make sure that Year 11 pupils are provided with as much support as possible.
- Typically, disadvantaged pupils make good progress, especially those within the low prior attainment group. However, you have rightly identified that in 2016 the most able disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 made less progress than you anticipated, especially those within the high prior attainment group. To correct this, you have used pupil premium funding well to address identified barriers to learning. In particular, leaders have worked on improving attendance and the levels of literacy in Year 7. Current achievement information and the evidence from work scrutiny and learning walks show the positive impact of these measures. As a result, disadvantaged pupils' progress in all groups is improving, with many pupils currently exceeding their targets. Leaders are justified in being strongly optimistic of improved outcomes in the summer 2017 examinations.
- Leaders' support for pupils who have an autistic spectrum disorder is a strength of the school. The relatively high numbers of pupils with an education, health and care plan and/or a statement of special educational needs are well catered for. The school's inclusive approach, together with the well-qualified and experienced staff, is effective in supporting these pupils' learning and general development. Progress of this group of pupils was in broadly in line with the national average in 2016 and current assessment information suggests a similar picture this year.
- Strong leadership of the sixth form ensures that study programme requirements are met. The increasingly stable retention rates of pupils from key stage 4 reflect the positive reputation of the sixth form. Students are very appreciative of all that staff do to raise their aspirations. They say they receive a good range of support, including pastoral and careers guidance, and are well prepared for life beyond school. Leaders provide strong support to students as they move on towards higher education and training. This has resulted in an increase in the number of successful applications to universities and apprenticeship courses.
- Leaders recognise that some results for A- and AS-level subjects were disappointing in the summer of 2016. Achievement in several subjects was below national averages in terms of the progress that students made from their starting points. In response to the detailed analysis of performance, leaders have not been afraid to take decisions in the best interests of the students. These include strengthening the leadership of the sixth form, modifying the curriculum offer by

changing some courses from A level to BTEC National Diploma, and rationalising the number of A-level subjects on offer from September 2017. The International Baccalaureate Careers Programme is an undoubted strength, producing very positive outcomes in the sixth form.

- Attendance had been a matter of concern for the school, but data since September 2016 reveals an improving picture in overall attendance in all groups of pupils. Leaders and staff have worked hard to secure this improvement, for example by using pupil premium funding to support disadvantaged pupils at risk of reduced attendance through home visits and counselling. Tracking and analysis of pupils' attendance is now tighter. Governors take a particular interest in helping to improve attendance, for example by meeting with pupils whose attendance is a concern. As a result, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who are frequently absent is improving.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching in mathematics and science is developed to enable all pupils to make consistently strong progress
- the current improvement in the progress, attainment and attendance of disadvantaged pupils in all prior-attainment groups is maintained.

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

Yours sincerely

David Powell
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and at the start of the day. We discussed your evaluation of the school's effectiveness and agreed the key areas we would focus on during the inspection. Over the day, inspectors held further discussions with you and other senior leaders. I also met with representatives of the governing body.

Inspectors, accompanied by your senior leaders, visited 10 lessons. In addition, a selection of pupils' work from different key stages was scrutinised jointly with school leaders. Inspectors took account of 107 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also considered written comments completed by 94 parents. There were 74 responses recorded by staff and 100 responses recorded by pupils on the online questionnaires. Inspectors also met with a group of pupils from Years 7 to 11, and separately with students from Years 12 and 13. Inspectors analysed a wide range of the school's documentation, including leaders' checks on

pupils' progress, attendance and behaviour information, and safeguarding policies and procedures.