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7 May 2015

Mr Maurice Hall  
The Headteacher  
The Duchess's Community High School  
Howling Lane  
Alnwick  
Northumberland  
NE66 1DH

Dear Mr Hall

### **No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Duchess's Community High School on 6 May 2015**

Following my visit with Mark Evans Her Majesty's Inspector to your school on 6 May 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils (students who are entitled to the government's additional funding called pupil premium). The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management (including governance) at the school.

#### **Evidence**

Inspectors held discussions with the headteacher, a group of senior leaders, middle leaders, three members of the governing body and the Director of Education and Skills for Northumberland local authority. Inspectors visited a number of classes with two members of the senior leadership team. They spoke to students informally in lessons and formally to two groups at lunchtime. Inspectors also reviewed documents relating to the achievement, attendance and progress of disadvantaged students, the school's evaluation of its work and the school improvement plan.

#### **Context**

Duchess's Community High School is a larger than average secondary school with a large sixth form. The school is part of the Aln Community; a hard federation of schools with one governing body. Other schools in the federation are Lindisfarne Middle School and the Dukes Middle School. The proportion of disadvantaged students known to be entitled to the pupil premium is below average. Although

rising, the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is well-below average. The proportion of students with a disability or special educational needs is below average. Most students remain at the school from the start of their high school education to the end of Year 11. A significant number move into the sixth form.

## **Main Findings**

Since October, there has been a step change in the school's approach to identifying and meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. Leaders, including governors, have implemented a range of strategies to improve outcomes and progress of disadvantaged students and to narrow the gap between these and other students where gaps remain wide. In 2014, the progress Year 11 students made from their starting points in Year 9 in English was good and the gap between their progress and other students in school was narrower than that found nationally for like groups. This was not the case in mathematics. Just over a third made the progress expected of them. Actions taken are starting to make a positive difference. Current tracking shows nearly two thirds are already making expected progress. Leaders know there is still more to do to ensure all disadvantaged students achieve their best and are taking action to improve matters.

Leaders and governors have a good understanding of the achievement, attendance and progress of disadvantaged students because of the wide range of regular information they now gather and monitor. However, leaders' written reports are too often descriptive, updating governors and senior staff in the federation about actions taking place rather than the difference the actions and initiatives are making. Action plans often lack specific timescales and measurable targets for disadvantaged students. The plans do not have enough information about who is responsible for delivering actions and who is checking to make sure the actions are working.

Joint working across the federation is aiding improved transitions for disadvantaged students as they move from the middle to the high school. Key senior staff work closely with staff in all middle schools to identify students' needs and starting points. Individual discussions with parents and students in Year 8 ensure parents are well informed about the expectations of the high school and the support and advice available. More opportunities for students to visit the school before they start, to smooth further the settling in process next term, are being provided this year.

## **External support**

Until the recent appointment of the Director of Education and Skills, there had been limited local authority challenge or support. This is in part because the local authority's powers of intervention are limited to schools that are in a category of concern, or require improvement following their Ofsted inspection, or causing concern to the local authority. On his appointment in October, the director visited the school to express his concerns about the achievement of disadvantaged students, particularly in mathematics and in the wide gap between the progress these students make and their peers from their starting points in school overall and

in mathematics. More effective challenge and support has resulted in improved partnership working with the local authority, a refocusing of school resources and the wide range of actions being implemented.

**The strengths in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged students effectively to achieve their potential are:**

- Support to students who are looked after by the local authority is strong. Every effort is made to meet their individual needs, support their learning and ensure they achieve well from their individual starting points.
- The leadership team has been reconfigured with new appointments and roles to meet the diverse needs of students. This includes the appointment of a pupil premium champion, an attendance officer and a special educational needs coordinator with a broader role in ensuring the needs of disadvantaged students who have special educational needs are well met. Each department now has a disadvantaged pupil advocate. This is helping to share good practice and develop a whole-school focus on improvement.
- Middle leaders speak convincingly about the increasingly forensic way they track students' progress and identify their learning needs. They also report how they understand that high expectations, high-quality teaching and knowing the students well are the key to success. They are working with senior leaders to raise expectations and outcomes across the school.
- Significant work has been undertaken to improve the quality of feedback and marking to students about their work. There was evidence of high-quality feedback in some students' books. Students report they value this because it helps them know how well they are doing and how to improve their work. They particularly value the opportunities they have in some lessons to respond to teachers' comments.
- Sixth-form students speak highly of the support, quality of teaching and the effectiveness of the information, advice and guidance provided by staff. They also appreciate the support they receive in completing their applications to university. Virtually all sixth formers carry out work in their local community and support younger students in the school. This builds their confidence and skills as they move into the world beyond school. They act as good role models for younger students.

**The weaknesses in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged students effectively to achieve their potential are:**

- The quality of marking and feedback to students is inconsistent. Some teachers mark only the regular test and assessment papers students are set. This means it is hard for students to gauge, or teachers to see, how well students are doing in their class books over time. Such an approach limits teachers' opportunities to check misunderstandings, provide extra challenge when work is too easy or check progress from the start of the school year.

Not all teachers are using the detailed, regular assessments they make of their students to set work that moves them on from their starting points.

- The school's summary evaluation of its work details historic and current attainment and progress of disadvantaged students in Year 10, 11 and the sixth form well. It also identifies what needs to improve, for example Key Stage 4 mathematics outcomes and progress for disadvantaged students. However, it does not explain what is being done to tackle this, so governors cannot check what actions the school is taking to make a difference.
- Leaders carefully track the destinations of students when they leave sixth form. They are aware that the proportion of disadvantaged students staying on throughout the sixth form is not as good as for other students. This meant that last year fewer moved on successfully to education, training or employment routes than other students in school. Leaders are also aware that fewer disadvantaged students are taking academic A levels. To tackle concerns leaders have developed strategies such as mentoring and one-to-one support for students and extending partnership working with universities and business, to broaden students horizons and expectations of what they can achieve. It is too soon to see the full impact of this work.
- Performance information provided to governors and parents about disadvantaged students is not always comparable to the information they provide about similar students nationally. This makes it difficult for them to check how well Duchess's disadvantaged students are doing compared to others nationally, or whether gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students are narrower or wider than average.
- The 2014 pupil premium report on the school's website is misleading. Disadvantaged students' results for gaining five A\* to C grades at GCSE including mathematics and English are presented in a flattering light. This is because the comparisons made with the national picture are not like for like.
- The in-school tracking information and detailed reports to governors on disadvantaged students are compared generally to that of all students in the school and not the non-disadvantaged students. This means some gaps are reported as being narrower than they actually are. Leaders are taking action to rectify these anomalies.
- Improved partnership working between the local authority's education welfare service, the school's recently appointed attendance officer and pastoral teams is enabling more timely direct work with individual students and their families when attendance starts to be a problem. Despite this work the persistent absence rates of a small number of disadvantaged students remains too high.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- Ensure information to parents and governors enables them to understand accurately the in-school gap between the achievements and progress of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students in school and similar comparisons nationally.

- Refine improvement plans to ensure governors can check the impact of actions taken in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers across the school.
- Improve the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress in lessons by ensuring:
  - teachers always use the information they have about students' current abilities to set work that moves them on quickly from their starting points
  - the high quality marking and feedback valued by students is provided in all lessons that they experience.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children and Adult Services for Northumberland County Council, to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

**Her Majesty's Inspector**