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Mr Ian Colling
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Colling

Short inspection of Magdalen College School

Following my visit with Philip Drabble, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 9 February 2016, 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 October 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Leaders have an accurate view of the areas of strength and those needing improvement. This is reflected in the school's clear and detailed self-evaluation. Appropriate improvement planning is in place and leaders are clear about their roles and responsibilities and what is expected of them.

There has been significant change since the last section 5 inspection. In January 2013, Magdalen College School converted to academy status. We discussed at length the many challenges that the school has faced and the ways in which these have been addressed. Noteworthy are the major staffing changes and the introduction of a revised faculty structure. The leadership of the school has been streamlined. You recognise the inevitable challenge that this has presented and the impact on staff morale. However, you are clear – the school has now moved to a new and more positive phase. The faculty leaders I spoke with mirrored this view.

You are clear that the no formal designation monitoring inspection conducted in June 2015 was a catalyst to ensure that leadership at all levels became more systematic. The line management of faculty leaders is now much more professional and performance management more thorough. Faculty and learning leaders told inspectors that they felt better informed and more involved in the leadership of the school. They said that they 'quite definitely' felt the increased expectations of their

role. In turn, they reported that the faculty leadership structure and improved training they received meant they were now more able to hold their teachers to account to ensure that improvement took place.

Pupils are polite, welcoming of visitors and keen to discuss their work and experiences of learning. During break and lunchtime, pupils cooperate and clearly enjoy spending time together. Leaders have taken a more robust approach to the management of behaviour; pupil exclusions and behaviour referrals are reducing as a result. Pupils told inspectors that some poor behaviour remained a feature of their lessons, but that this was now much better managed by their teachers. The improved leadership and systems to manage behaviour are welcome and teachers said that pupil behaviour had improved 'markedly'. More is needed to ensure that behaviour in lessons is consistently good and that pupils' learning is uninterrupted.

Attendance is managed systematically and is well led. Pupils' attendance has improved, significantly so for those pupils entitled to pupil premium funding and those supported by a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Leaders have put in place bespoke interventions to make sure that pupils attend school and these have had real impact. The way in which you engage in preventative work with partner schools within the community is a strength. You know your family of learners well.

You told me about the important link within your school between good-quality teaching and learning and good pupil behaviour. You have an accurate grip on the strengths of your school and where improvements are needed. There are many subject areas where pupils make significantly good progress and pupils said that they appreciated this – they also recognised that the quality of teaching overall had improved. However, you know that there are subject areas within the school where further improvement is needed. You are very aware of this and have plans in place. The pace of this improvement needs to accelerate.

Because the tracking and monitoring of pupils' achievement is now more systematic, pupils' underperformance is quickly spotted and acted upon. The progress made by disadvantaged pupils has improved and this improvement is set to continue. The gaps in the performance of these pupils and others nationally are closing and leaders and governors track this carefully. Pupils said that they received a great deal of guidance and support and that there are many opportunities to receive high-quality help. You have reviewed the target-setting process to make sure that the expectations of what pupils can achieve are higher. Teething problems remain. Pupils in Year 11 find their current targets confusing because their targets changed mid-year. We discussed the need to make sure that there was clarity for these pupils so that they clearly understood the GCSE grades that they were now aiming for.

We agreed that your plans to address the remaining inconsistencies in the way in which the feedback and marking policy is being implemented by staff are appropriate. Additionally, it is clear that further work is required to improve the presentation of work that is accepted from pupils. We discussed this at length and

you are clear that this is a 'quick win' to address immediately. Members of the governing body said that they would monitor these priorities carefully.

Safeguarding is effective.

You take the safeguarding of your pupils extremely seriously. The single central record meets requirements and is systematically overseen by you. Staff are well trained and regularly kept up to date with the latest guidance; this includes staff new to the school who receive a thorough induction. Staff are very clear about their responsibilities and the appropriate procedures to follow. Pupils said that they felt safe and that they had many members of staff that they could speak with if they needed help. Bullying is rare – one Year 11 pupil said 'no way would that happen here'. Pupils said that they felt well cared for and that they valued this enormously.

Inspection findings

- You have managed a very turbulent period extremely well, but now have in place many of the structures you need to continue to improve and grow the school. You have been supported in this by committed senior leaders and governors.
- Behaviour has improved within the school and both staff and pupils say that things are getting better. Exclusions are reducing. This is true of all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, and behaviour referrals are declining. Teachers are more consistently applying the behaviour policy. However, this remains an area to improve in those subjects that are currently underperforming.
- Attendance has improved. Persistent absence has reduced, particularly for those pupils supported by the pupil premium funding and those with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. You know your pupils and work effectively with your community to ensure that they attend school.
- The proportion of pupils who achieved five or more grades at GCSE including English and mathematics is significantly above national figures. The proportion of pupils, including those entitled to free school meals, who make expected progress in both English and mathematics is significantly above national averages. Pupils do not achieve as well in modern foreign languages, humanities, art and science as they do in English and mathematics. You have firm plans in place to address this. Governors must ensure that improvement takes place at pace and that these plans are closely monitored.
- An external review of the post-16 provision has recently taken place. You are pleased that the achievement of learners within the sixth form is improving and that increasing numbers of disadvantaged pupils are applying to study. You have your challenges, and are working with external partners to ensure that learners in the sixth form gain a positive experience and that more pupils make Magdalen College School their first choice. This external review involved the sixth form leader who welcomed the level of scrutiny and now feels able to work on the recommendations.

- Expectations are not high enough in some areas. The quality of work that teachers accept from some pupils is too low; this includes the work of more-able pupils. You are aware of this and intend to address this as a matter of urgency.
- The feedback and marking policy is not consistently applied within and across subject areas. The policy was implemented in September 2015. You recognise the importance of ensuring that pupils receive high-quality feedback, and are continuing to work with faculty leaders to rectify this. The monitoring of the quality of feedback and marking at faculty level should remain an area of focus as it is not yet good enough.
- Target-setting is now more ambitious and the information about the way in which pupils make progress is now more thorough and better understood by staff. Assessment is more accurate and subject leaders have links with external partners so that moderation can take place. There is, however, a 'legacy' that needs to be addressed in Year 11. Some of this involves target-setting, some involves previous curriculum models. Governors and leaders must continue their close scrutiny of the current Year 11.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the underperformance within modern foreign languages, humanities, art and science is addressed
- the feedback and marking policy is consistently implemented so that pupils receive regular information as to how to improve
- expectations are increased of the quality of work pupils produce
- the current Year 11 pupils understand precisely the GCSE targets that they are aiming for and that they receive appropriate help if studying the certain aspects of science or modern foreign languages that we discussed.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jayne Ashman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you, faculty leaders and representatives of the governing body. Meetings were held with the deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher in charge of behaviour, safeguarding and attendance. Inspectors visited

lessons and observed learning across all key stages, including the sixth form. Inspectors observed behaviour around the school, at break and lunchtimes. Inspectors spoke formally with a group of Year 7 and Year 11 pupils. Inspectors considered 118 views of parents posted on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. Inspectors considered 40 responses to the inspection questionnaire for school staff. A range of documents and school policies were reviewed, including the school's self-evaluation, the feedback and marking policy, and information about pupils' performance.