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Jane Herriman
Executive Principal
The Duston School
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Northamptonshire
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Dear Mrs Herriman

No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Duston School

Following my visit to your school on 23 February 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and the time you took to discuss behaviour in your school.

The inspection was a monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with the no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills was concerned about behaviour at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors considered evidence that included:

- observations of pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning in lessons
- observations of pupils' behaviour throughout the day, including discussions with pupils
- documentary evidence
- discussions with school leaders, governors and staff.

Having evaluated the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers have taken effective action to maintain the high standards of behaviour and attitudes identified at the school's previous inspection.

Context

The Duston School is an academy that became a trust within its own right in March 2015: The Duston Education Trust. It is a teaching school: The Duston Teaching School Alliance. School-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) is offered. In September 2015, the school opened a primary school phase; 82 pupils attend this provision. Previously, the school was part of the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). The school is large, with 1,472 pupils. Nearly one fifth of the pupils are from minority ethnic groups, and fewer pupils than the national average speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is broadly in line with the national average. The number of pupils receiving special educational needs support is below the national average. The proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs, or an education, health and care plan, is above the national average.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

You, the governors and trustees have led the school well through a tumultuous period. We discussed at length the decision taken to move the school from the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). This process was described as both 'lengthy' and 'tortuous'. Since March 2015, when the school became a trust in its own right, The Duston Education Trust has been 'flying with wings'.

A talented senior leadership team is now in place. The school is supported by a highly effective Chair of the Governing Body. Governors and trustees have appropriate skills and are committed and ambitious to ensure that the school provides a high-quality education for all pupils within the community.

The response of leaders to the priorities for further improvement, identified as a result of the no formal designation monitoring inspection conducted in January 2015, has been rapid and effective. There has been a dramatic reduction in the proportion of pupils that are excluded from the school for fixed periods and for those repeatedly experiencing this punishment. The proportion of pupils excluded from the school is now well below the national average. Pupils who are eligible for free school meals, and those who have been identified as having special educational needs or disability, are now much less likely to be excluded from school.

The behaviour policy is effective and is understood by staff and by pupils. There is now a graduated response to the way in which the behaviour of pupils is managed.

Leaders and teachers are involved in preventative work with pupils and their parents to ensure that the radical step of pupil exclusion is avoided. The reduction in the proportion of pupils excluded from the school is evidence that this proactive work is having an impact. The pupils in Year 11 that I spoke with said that their teachers are consistent and fair in the way that their behaviour is managed.

The school is busy at social times, including break and lunch, but pupils behave well. There is a great deal of staff presence and senior leaders are highly visible. Pupils said that they enjoyed this time in the school day, and that it was sociable and safe. There is space inside and outside the school for pupils to meet their friends. The library is extremely well used. A range of activities are provided here, and very many pupils take advantage of these. Pupils play chess, read, attempt quiz and crosswords, use computers and meet their friends. Inspectors saw pupils that were cooperative, amenable and happy.

Pupils were observed behaving well within lessons. Pupils were behaving particularly well in those lessons where effective learning was taking place. When asked, many pupils felt that the majority of their lessons were uninterrupted by the poor behaviour of others. I spoke with you about the small number of lessons seen, where lower-ability pupils would benefit from more support to organise their learning. We agreed that further work was required to support some pupils to prepare for examinations and assessments.

There is a five-minute warning bell before each lesson to ensure that pupils are prompt to lessons. I discussed with leaders their evaluation of the effectiveness of this strategy. They stated that an improvement has been seen, but that ensuring that all pupils arrive to all lessons without delay remains an area of focus.

Attendance of all pupils is now above national averages. The attendance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals, and those who have been identified as having special educational needs or disability, has improved significantly. Good-quality information is used to make sure that if a pupil requires support, they receive it. Pupils said that things were now much stricter but that, 'actually, we like coming to school'. The Year 11 pupils I spoke with said that they appreciated the support they received from their teachers. They spoke in particular about the after-school intervention classes that were available to them. All said that they volunteered to attend these sessions, and all pupils spoken formally with said that they attended regularly. 'We like the pizza we get as a treat – but we know we will learn a lot too!' Leaders are determined that pupils will attend school and achieve well.

We spoke candidly about the achievement of pupils within the school, particularly the achievement of pupils who are currently in Year 11. You have accurately identified the areas to focus upon to ensure that standards remain high. You use high-quality information to identify the 'skills gap' that teachers need to address in order that pupils make progress. You believe it is time to be 'efficient with

learning time' and closely link learning to each pupil's starting point. We discussed the school assessment policy and the 'tight, loose agenda for assessment'. This is an assessment strategy that provides guidance to faculty leaders on aspects of assessment that are non-negotiable, while also allowing for subject-specific flexibility. There is much merit to this process. However, the department-specific aspects require further consideration. It was agreed that assessment remained a leadership priority.

The achievement of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is improving. You appreciate the urgency of ensuring that these pupils progress as well as other pupils nationally, and have plans in place to ensure this. It is clear that you and your team have been successful in raising the aspirations of many of these pupils. One strategy you have used is to ask Year 11 pupils to write sentences about themselves to inspire younger pupils. The Year 11 pupils I spoke with, many of whom were eligible for pupil premium funding (additional government funding), were proud and eager to share their sentences: 'He did his best in all he did.' 'She was determined to achieve her ambitions and make her family proud.' 'He was hardworking and didn't regret anything.'

The arrangements for safeguarding pupils are highly effective. Systems are well understood because the training for all staff, including governors and trustees, is comprehensive. Partnership work is good. Pupils said that they felt safe within the school. They said that they appreciated the enormous effort made by their teachers to provide advice, support and help. Bullying is something that 'doesn't happen here!' Assembly and form periods are used to inform pupils of additional ways to keep safe, including online. Careers advice and guidance is a strong feature of the support provided to pupils. Pupils told inspectors that they had not realised they could attend college if they did not achieve high GCSE grades, but after participating in a school trip to a local post-16 provider, they now knew they could. A large number of these pupils are now applying to attend college after they leave the school. It is clear that the school motto, 'every child – whatever it takes', is put into practice.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the attendance of all pupils remains better than national expectations.
- Ensure that the number of pupils excluded from the school remains significantly lower than national averages.
- Make sure that the assessment policy is effective.
- Continue the work to ensure that the pupils eligible for pupil premium funding achieve as well as other pupils nationally.

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