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Mr James Ingham-Hill
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Dear Mr Ingham-Hill

Short inspection of Sidmouth College

Following my visit to the school on 18 October 2016 with Non Davies, 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 February 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Following the inspection in 2012, the performance of the school declined. However, there has been a steady trend of improvement over the last three years. The points for improvement identified in the report, following the 2012 inspection, have been addressed well. The overall achievement of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, was strong in 2016. The clear direction and strong leadership you have provided since you took on the post of principal at the start of this school year have given impetus to increasing the pace of improvement. You have been supported well by other senior leaders and by governors.

Your self-evaluation is accurate. You precisely identify what is working well and those areas of the school that need to be strengthened. Working with governors, you have clearly defined the priorities for the school and have already put in place the required actions. The arrangements now in place for tracking pupils' progress, and checking the effectiveness of teaching and support for pupils, will enable you to sharply monitor and evaluate the impact of these actions.

The very large majority of current pupils in all year groups and in a wide range of subjects, including English and mathematics, make strong progress. Previous differences between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the school and other pupils have reduced significantly. Disadvantaged pupils now achieve well

across a wide range of subjects, including English and mathematics. In most subjects, the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, are expected to achieve at a higher level and rise to this challenge well to produce work of a high quality. However, this is not the case in all classes and in all subjects, such as in science. The achievement of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities rose significantly in 2016. However, these pupils are still not progressing as rapidly as they could. You had already made this a priority for the school and the work undertaken this year has led to further improvements. In some subjects, including mathematics, pupils in Year 7 classes are repeating work covered in primary school without teaching taking this to a higher level or developing a deeper understanding. Plans are in place to review the Year 7 curriculum for all subjects, particularly in English, mathematics and science, and to involve your partner primary schools in this.

The sixth form has improved and continues to improve. The achievement of students in the sixth form rose markedly in 2016. The weaknesses evident in the 2015 outcomes, the achievement of female students and of those with low prior attainment (average GCSE grade C), have been addressed. Both these groups are currently making much improved progress. There is still variation in the progress made by students with similar starting points in a minority of subjects.

The governance of the school is strong. Governors are very well equipped to provide you with the essential balance of support and challenge. They do both robustly. Their understanding of the strengths and weaker features of the school is impressive. They are relentless in pursuing their own evidence to better hold you to account. For example, in science, they analysed the information you provided and wanted to know why some classes in each of Years 7 to 9 were doing better than others. Their forensic analysis identified weakness in teachers' ongoing assessment of pupils' progress. This reduced confidence in the information fed into assessment review points. Improvements have recently been made to address this.

Safeguarding is effective.

Governors and the school's leadership team have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are up to date, meet requirements and are fit for purpose. All records are detailed and of good quality. You and other leaders, supported very well by governors, teachers and other staff, have created an effective culture and harmonious community that keeps pupils safe and well looked after. Pupils and sixth-form students are fully involved in creating and maintaining this culture. Effective procedures ensure that the safety, welfare and all-round development of pupils are paramount to prepare them well for the next steps in their lives.

Governors' attention to safeguarding is strong. They help ensure that it permeates the life of the school. The very well-informed link safeguarding governor has frequent meetings with the designated safeguarding lead to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of arrangements and of staff training. Regular detailed and evaluative reports are provided for the full governing body. Every visit by a governor to the school involves them asking questions of pupils, teachers and

leaders about safeguarding. Governors are prepared well for this by the lead governor. Governors have an impressive understanding of the need to keep the procedures for the safe use of computers and other technology, and the pupils' use of the internet and social media, up to date. While they know that currently there are no pupils educated partly or wholly off the school site, they monitor this aspect of safeguarding very carefully.

The overwhelming majority of parents believe that the school keeps their children safe and cares for them well. Pupils enjoy coming to the school and this is shown in their good attendance. Pupils are clear about what they need to do to keep themselves safe. Teachers also strongly agree that pupils are safe. Frequent analysis of all relevant information, such as absence data and records of any incidents of poor behaviour, is undertaken by senior staff and governors. They identify any potential safeguarding or child protection concerns. The views of pupils are gathered constantly and discussed at weekly meetings of senior leaders.

All staff are fully aware of all aspects of safeguarding as a result of regular and effective training. They have a good understanding of how to spot the 'triggers' that can lead to concerns about individuals and groups of pupils or sixth-form students. They are secure in their understanding of the 'Prevent' duty and are alert to the dangers of extremism and radicalisation.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have a very clear understanding of what is working well in the school and what has led to the improvements in pupils' achievement over the last three years. They are also clear about what still needs to be done. The positive impact of the actions they have taken can be seen in the achievement of current pupils.
- The achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including those who are among the most able, has improved significantly in all year groups and across a wide range of subjects. Disadvantaged pupils in Years 7 to 9 are making strong progress so that, where necessary, they are catching up with other pupils.
- The achievement of pupils who join the school with low prior attainment has improved across a wide range of subjects. These pupils now achieve well – as seen, for example, in their work in English and mathematics.
- The achievement of current pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities shows that the improvements made up to the end of last year have continued and that the pace of improvement is more rapid. While some of these pupils could still do better, teachers are much more aware of the need to set higher expectations. The progress of these pupils is checked frequently and, if necessary, adjustments to the support they receive are made. Good use is being made of teaching assistants to support these pupils in lessons.

- Teachers are using the new assessment system, introduced at the start of the year, to have higher expectations of the level and quality of pupils' work. However, some teachers still lack a precise understanding of what pupils already can do, know and understand, particularly in Year 7 mathematics and science, to deepen pupils' learning or take it to a higher level. The planned review of the curriculum will address this.
- In some classes, teachers do not check the work of disadvantaged pupils carefully enough to see if they have the potential to achieve at a higher level than the school's assessment system suggests.
- Pupils read widely and well. Many read for pleasure. When pupils read from textbooks or information provided by the teacher, they show good levels of comprehension.
- Pre-16 curriculum and careers guidance ensures that students make good decisions about 16 to 19 study programmes.
- The large majority of students who join the sixth form stay on their courses and are successful. Those who leave transfer to a vocational course at a further education college or take up an apprenticeship. The school only offers A-level courses.
- A significant proportion of students, up to half in some years, choose to leave the school for their 16 to 19 education or to take up apprenticeships. Leaders do what they can to gather information about the retention and progress of these students.
- Students currently in the sixth form mostly make good progress. Analysis of the 2016 results shows that the previous weaknesses in the performance of female students and those with low prior attainment have been reduced dramatically.
- In a small number of A-level subjects there is still some variation in the progress made by students with similar starting points. In some subjects, there is variation between different classes. Where this exists, teachers do not build well enough on what students already know and understand.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons is rarely less than good and often exemplary. During break and lunchtimes, and during lesson changeovers, pupils behave in a safe, sensible, calm and orderly manner. They move promptly to lessons and arrive ready to learn.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe and how to cope with the range of risks they may be exposed to. They know what to do if they have any concerns. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good.
- A comprehensive programme of personal development for pupils in Years 7 to 11 is provided through weekly tutorial time, assemblies and special events. While pupils can recall recent topics well, their understanding of previously taught topics is less secure.
- Students in the sixth form have a good understanding of all safeguarding issues at an appropriately mature level.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the planned review of the curriculum will enable teachers to use a precise understanding of what pupils already can do, know and understand in their planning and teaching, particularly for classes in Year 7, to deepen pupils' learning or take it to a higher level
- the achievement of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is raised further
- pupils' understanding of the topics covered in the personal development programme is evaluated and reinforced.

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

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with the principal, all other senior leaders, and with the chair and two other governors. Inspectors visited lessons, accompanied by senior leaders, in most year groups, including in the sixth form, and across a wide range of subjects. One formal meeting was held with a group of Years 10 and 11 pupils. Informal discussions were held with a large number of pupils during morning break and at lunchtime. Inspectors also talked to pupils during the tutorial time at the start of the day. They listened to pupils read, in lessons and during tutorial time. A range of documents were evaluated, including the analysis of assessment, attendance and other information; the school self-evaluation and improvement plan; and curriculum plans including those related to the personal development of pupils.

Inspectors undertook a range of activities to check the effectiveness of the school's arrangements for safeguarding, including checking documents and talking with pupils, teachers, school leaders and governors.

Inspectors took account of the 51 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 46 with additional comments, and the views of 13 pupils (almost all in the sixth form) and 71 staff who completed the appropriate online surveys.

At the start of the inspection, the following lines of enquiry were agreed with the principal and other senior leaders, and later discussed with governors.

- Is the improvement in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including those who are among the most able, sustained in all year groups and across a wide range of subjects?
- Do pupils with low prior attainment achieve well across a wide range of subjects?
- Do pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make as much progress as they should, in a wide range of subjects?
- How well does the curriculum and pre-16 careers guidance ensure that students make good decisions about 16 to 19 study programmes (in the college and in other 16 to 19 providers) and how well is this supported by retention, progress and achievement, and destinations data?
- In the sixth form, has the weak performance of female students and those with low prior attainment (average GCSE grade C), the wide variation in attainment for students with similar starting points in a range of A-level subjects and weak performance in other subjects been tackled effectively?
- As part of checking the effectiveness of the arrangements for safeguarding, inspectors evaluated how effectively pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is undertaken and how well they are prepared for life in modern Britain.