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Mr Darren Bishop
Principal
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Dear Mr Bishop

Short inspection of The Excel Academy

Following my visit to the school on 16 November 2016 with Bernice Astling, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, supported by highly effective senior leaders, know the school very well, including its many strengths and fewer weaknesses. When issues arise, through thorough analysis of data and careful attention to detail you tackle them swiftly and successfully. For example, you quickly identified and remedied the reasons for some pupils' disappointing GCSE English results in 2015. Consequently, there was a sharp improvement in 2016, with pupils making very strong progress in English.

Expectations of staff and pupils are high. There is a strong team spirit across staff at all levels in the school and they are very committed to the school's ethos of 'Pride and Respect'. All members of staff who responded to the online inspection questionnaire said that they are proud to work at the school. Pupils hold their school in equally high regard. They wear their uniform with pride and enthusiastically told inspectors how much they value their school. Year 11 pupils were particularly fulsome in their praise of how the school has improved in all ways since they started, a little over four years ago.

The Excel Academy is now the school of choice for an increasing number of local parents and, consequently, it is now oversubscribed and has large cohorts in lower year groups.

Parents recognise and value the education the school provides for their children. The great majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, confirmed that their children make good progress in school and that they would recommend the school to other parents. One parent wrote, 'I am very happy with my child's education. My child enjoys school and is happy to attend Excel Academy. I couldn't wish for more.'

At the previous inspection, leaders were tasked with raising attainment in mathematics and monitoring and supporting disadvantaged pupils better so that their progress improved. You have tackled these areas well.

Progress in mathematics has steadily improved since the previous inspection and the teaching of this subject is now strong. Teachers have high expectations of pupils, who routinely work on challenging mathematical problems. The department consistently focuses on developing pupils' understanding of mathematics, rather than simply on learning methods to solve problems.

Disadvantaged pupils now make similar progress to other pupils, both in school and nationally, across a wide range of subjects. Teachers ensure that the progress of disadvantaged pupils has a high priority when planning lessons and marking work. Leaders apply an analytical approach to identifying the factors that are hindering each pupil's learning. At regular 'raising achievement and progress' (RAP) meetings, leaders identify pupils who are falling behind with their work. They then assign a 'key worker' who draws up an action plan and coordinates a personalised programme of support. Leaders regularly check that extra help is making a difference and pupils catch up as a result. Leaders are now determined to see disadvantaged pupils' progress accelerate so that differences between their attainment and that of others diminish even more rapidly.

Not all subjects have improved since the previous inspection. Leaders were surprised and disappointed with GCSE outcomes in history and science in 2016. Unlike in most other subjects, teachers' forecasts of pupils' attainment were overgenerous. In these subjects there is greater variability in the quality of teaching, especially in the level of challenge, the accuracy of assessment and the quality of feedback that teachers give to pupils. However, you have acted quickly to address these weaknesses and, although there is still some way to go, there is already evidence of improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that keeping pupils safe is everyone's top priority at your school. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Policies, procedures and systems are highly effective, very well understood and followed diligently by staff. The high-quality leadership and attention to detail present elsewhere in the school are also evident in this area. For example, the school's website contains many

helpful safeguarding links for pupils and parents in an easy-to-use format.

Staff training is supplemented by regular 'safeguarding briefings', and these have recently provided guidance on topics such as sexting, computer apps and private fostering. Members of staff readily pass on any concerns they have about pupils because they have been well trained and they have confidence in leaders to deal with referrals speedily and appropriately.

All members of staff who completed the inspection questionnaire and almost all parents who responded to Parent View agreed that pupils are safe in school. Inspectors spoke with many pupils during the inspection and all told us that they feel safe in school. Pupils told us that bullying is extremely rare and that they trust the school's adults to deal with any bullying or other problems that might arise. Through Parent View, a very small number of parents expressed concerns about how the school deals with bullying. Inspectors found no evidence to support their concerns.

Pupils understand the dangers that can arise when using the internet because they are taught about this in school. For example, several pupils explained to us that you should never share personal details online and you should never respond to a message from someone who you do not know.

Inspection findings

- Governors provide very effective support and challenge to leaders. They scrutinise data about achievement, attendance, behaviour and teaching and ask leaders searching questions as a result. Members of the 'oversight and scrutiny committee' have the expertise to interrogate assessment information and identify key strategic issues. They regularly visit the school to check, first hand, on the impact of leaders' actions, and they use external expert advice well in areas where they feel they need it.
- Leaders at all levels understand their roles and responsibilities very well. Senior and middle leaders know that they are accountable for standards in their areas. Senior leaders are effective and respected by other members of staff. Middle leaders, several of whom have worked at the school for some time, form a united team who are committed to seeing their areas continue to improve.
- The school is a member of the Colleges Academies Trust and the trust provides effective support in several areas. High-quality advice and tenacious leadership of safeguarding have been key reasons for the school's strength in this area. The trust is acutely aware of the need to source high-quality support when it is required. For example, it has commissioned effective support from The George Spencer Academy in the form of in-depth reviews of the English department in 2015 and the science department in 2016.
- GCSE outcomes in 2016 showed pupils making good progress across most subjects including English and mathematics. Progress was weaker in science and history. The school's assessment information, confirmed by inspection evidence, shows that pupils in all years make increasingly strong

progress because of effective teaching in most subjects including English, mathematics, creative subjects, physical education and languages.

- The most able pupils, in common with other pupils, make good progress across most subjects. This is because expectations are high, teachers challenge pupils to do well and pupils rise to that challenge. Inspectors observed several examples of disadvantaged most-able pupils responding well to demanding tasks and producing high-quality work during the inspection.
- Leaders are meticulous and strategic in their use of data about all areas of the school's work. Data about progress, attendance, teaching and behaviour is collected regularly. Leaders then analyse it carefully to identify trends or areas of weakness. They also use it very effectively at an individual pupil level to identify when pupils are falling behind with their work.
- Pupils enjoy school and attendance has improved over recent years to be above the national average for secondary schools. This is because leaders have reinforced to pupils and parents the importance of regular school attendance. Staff also work well with the parents of poor attenders, and the number of such pupils is falling as a result. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils, which was low, has improved at a much faster rate than that of other pupils. Consequently, the difference between the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and others is diminishing rapidly.
- Pupils behave well. They are attentive and keen to do well. The school is calm and orderly during the day, including at break and lunchtime. Pupils are courteous and polite to each other and to adults. They move sensibly around the narrow corridors between lessons.
- The number of fixed-term exclusions, which had fallen to the national average, rose a little in 2015. Leaders acknowledge that they have not used alternatives to exclusion sufficiently. Consequently, exclusion has not proved to be as effective a sanction as it should be in improving the behaviour of a small number of pupils. Too many pupils have been excluded more than once because they did not learn their lesson the first time. Leaders plan to introduce a system of internal exclusion in the near future.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching across the school is consistently strong so that pupils make good progress in all subjects
- fixed-term exclusion is more effective in improving the behaviour of the small number of pupils with whom it is used as a sanction.

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

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, your senior leadership team and other members of staff who have leadership responsibilities. With senior leaders, we visited several classes during the day where we observed teaching and learning and we spoke with pupils about their work. We talked with many pupils in lessons and at break and lunchtime. We listened to pupils read and talked to them about reading and the books they enjoy. We met with four governors, one of whom is the chief executive of the Colleges Academies Trust. We scrutinised several documents including your self-evaluation, intervention action plans, minutes of governing body meetings, and safeguarding and child protection records. We considered 35 responses to Parent View and 39 responses from members of staff to the online inspection questionnaire.

At our initial meeting we agreed five focus areas for the inspection. These were:

- the quality of teaching and pupils' progress in all year groups and whether it reflects the improved GCSE results of 2016
- leaders' actions to improve achievement in some subjects, including history and science
- standards achieved by disadvantaged pupils
- standards of behaviour in the school given some historic weaknesses in published exclusion and attendance data
- the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding procedures.