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Mr David Williams
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Dear Mr Williams

Short inspection of Netherthorpe School

Following my visit to the school on 28 February 2017 with Julie Sheppard, 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. This is a school that is proud of its history and its many successes, but does not rest on its laurels. Changes to the leadership of the school have allowed a fresh perspective on the school's work. You took up your post in September 2016 and have brought considerable zest and zeal to leading the school through a new chapter in its development. The school is part of the recently formed Cavendish Learning Trust, a small but growing multi-academy trust. You are keen to ensure that the right foundations are in place to enable the school to build on its effective partnerships with other schools.

You and your leadership team work well together. Although some are new in post, they have quickly got to grips with their responsibilities and understand the priorities for improvement. You complement each other's strengths, and are equally committed to maintaining the school's traditions, while ensuring that it continues to develop and improve.

You are highly ambitious for the school's further success, but you are clear that this should not come at the expense of your staff's work-life balance. Staff at all levels are very clear about the direction you have set for the school and are very supportive of your aims. They appreciate your open, consultative style of leadership, and the opportunities they have to contribute to the development of policies.

Leaders have successfully addressed the areas for improvement from the previous inspection. For example, the culture of sharing best practice is now well established both in this school and with other schools. The teaching and learning network meetings allow staff to focus on specific areas of their practice that they wish to improve. Staff from other schools regularly drop in to these 'teach meets'. Leaders from local schools are highly appreciative of the quality of support they have received from your staff. Equally so, teachers from your school recognise that there is much to be learned from visiting other schools. From these informal contacts, local networks – for example, for literacy coordinators – have developed, allowing staff to work together through more formal structures and devise local solutions to issues of concern. The openness to learning and development is one of the reasons that your school remains successful.

On your appointment in September, you quickly identified ways to improve the school further. You are honest about the school's relative weaknesses, and have put in place firm plans to address these. For example, you readily acknowledge that achievement in the sixth form needs to improve and have set about reviewing the curriculum to ensure that it best meets students' needs and enables them to succeed.

You are keen to develop the role of middle leaders. Not all middle leaders keep a close focus on the progress of groups of pupils in their subject areas. They do not ensure that teachers use the information about pupils' starting points, or their achievement, to plan learning that enables all groups of pupils to make rapid progress.

In 2016, attainment at key stage 4 remained high in comparison to national figures. For most pupils, and in most subjects, this represented good progress. Results in English showed improvement on previous years. However, there was some variation in achievement in different subjects. Pupils did not achieve as well in science, for example, as they did in English and mathematics. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities did not achieve as well as others, especially those of middle ability. Leaders have undertaken a review of the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They recognise that teaching assistants are not equally effective in supporting pupils in class. Likewise, they are keen to reduce the instances when pupils are removed from class in order to work with non-specialists. Rightly, leaders acknowledge that teaching in the classroom must meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities more effectively.

The most able pupils and those of middle ability are not consistently challenged by their class and homework – a concern echoed by some parents, and acknowledged by leaders. Leaders believe that at times, too little is demanded of the most able pupils, and especially of the most able boys. You have begun to address this issue. For example, training for teachers has focused on effective questioning of the most able pupils. Leaders have recognised that change has to start in Year 7, to ensure rapid and sustained progress from the end of key stage 2. They have reviewed and amended the curriculum for key stage 3 so that it is now more challenging for the

most able pupils. The school development plan has a clear focus on ensuring that class and homework for these pupils is more consistently challenging. The early signs are promising. For example, in a Year 7 English lesson most-able boys were enjoying the challenge of using and critiquing persuasive writing techniques. Effective questioning from the teacher left little room for complacency.

Leaders have been successful in improving the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in English and mathematics, but acknowledge that they have focused their efforts chiefly on these two subjects. The pupil premium leader is now working with colleagues from across the school to ensure that disadvantaged pupils achieve well across all subject areas. The most able disadvantaged pupils do not achieve as highly as their peers.

A positive ethos runs through the school. Pupils we met with were polite, confident and keen to engage in discussion, whether about their work or to share their views about the school. They enjoy positive and supportive relationships with their teachers. Pupils quickly adapt to the high expectations that are placed on their behaviour, and the school is a calm, orderly, well-maintained environment. In the lessons we visited, pupils were focused and engaged in their work. They behave sensibly at lunchtime and need little reminding to move to lessons. Pupils agree that while teachers want them to achieve well academically, they are supportive and mindful too of their emotional well-being. A comprehensive programme of extra-curricular activities and clubs complements academic learning; from the long-established and successful debating society to the handwriting club, a wide range of interests are catered for.

The sixth-form students I met with were fiercely proud of their school, its history and traditions. They know that their school enjoys an excellent reputation in the local community and are rightly proud of the role that they and others play in upholding its reputation. They feel much supported by their teachers, especially their pastoral manager, who they jokingly call their 'sixth-form mom'. They describe her as an 'extremely humble person for whom nothing is too much trouble'. Such sentiment typifies the relationships that pupils enjoy with their teachers.

These students are excellent role models for the younger pupils, enjoying leadership positions in school and setting a fine example of hard work and good conduct. They appreciate that recent changes to leadership have brought about many positive changes. However, they have much to say about how the school could improve further. They agree with you that some staff need to set higher standards of learning in the sixth form. They firmly believe that their academic curriculum would be enhanced by a more systematic programme of personal, social, health and economic education, sex and relationships education and opportunities to learn about the world of work.

Governors are skilled and experienced, and share leaders', staff and pupils' commitment and loyalty to this school. The transition to the multi-academy trust has been managed well, and governors have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities as distinct from those of the trust board. This puts the school in

a good position to develop further.

Safeguarding is effective.

Any concerns that are referred to the designated safeguarding lead are followed up with due rigour. Records are detailed and of high quality. Links with the multi-agency team in the local authority are used well to ensure that information about pupils is shared and that pupils receive the support that they need. The school's pastoral support managers make visits to pupils' homes to check on them when they are absent from school. Having completed an audit of its safeguarding practices recently, leaders are working on implementing actions to further improve this aspect of their work.

Pupils who spoke with inspectors confirmed that the good relationships they enjoy with their teachers are a key factor in helping them to feel safe at school. They trust their teachers and support staff to listen and respond to their concerns. Staff ensure that pupils know how to stay safe while using social media. However, the programme of personal, social, health and economic education is not as well developed at key stages 4 and 5 as it is at key stage 3. Therefore, the older pupils have fewer opportunities to learn about healthy and safe relationships.

Inspection findings

- Achievement in science shows improvement on last year, with a higher proportion of pupils having already achieved an A* to C grade in this subject. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who have done so has also risen. However, not all pupils make rapid progress from their starting points in science. Those who follow the additional science course are currently not achieving as well as others.
- Leaders have undertaken an internal review of the effectiveness of the pupil premium funding. They have carefully considered what has worked in school, as well as what the evidence from published research states, to ensure that disadvantaged pupils achieve well across all areas of the curriculum. The appointment of an attendance officer has been effective in improving the attendance of these pupils at school. Current information suggests some improvements in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, for example in science. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of these relatively new initiatives.
- Achievement in English at key stage 4 rose in 2016 as a result of effective, coordinated leadership. Pupils were well prepared for the changes in the curriculum. Opportunities to share good practice are well embedded in the school so that teachers can share their ideas on what has worked well.
- On the whole, pupils attain highly at the school, but the headline figures mask the underachievement of some groups of pupils, such as those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders acknowledge that this is not a matter of ability, since some of these pupils who underachieved in 2016 were of middle ability, based on their prior attainment. Inspectors' observations of

learning confirmed the school's view that support for these pupils in class is inconsistent. Some teaching assistants were highly effective in promoting learning, but this was not consistently the case. Some of the parents of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, who responded to the freetext service, stated that they received good support from staff. However, this was not universally so. Middle leaders who spoke with leaders would welcome more guidance from specialists to ensure that teaching for these pupils is consistently effective.

- In 2016, boys did not achieve as well as girls in many areas of their learning, and especially in languages. The proportion of most-able boys who gained a grade A* to C in a modern foreign language was well below that of girls in the school, and well below that seen nationally. Some of the reasons for boys' underachievement were specific to this year group. Current information shows that boys are doing at least as well as girls in the EBacc subjects. However, most-able pupils and those of middle ability are not consistently challenged by their classwork and homework.
- Leaders have put firm plans in place to improve provision in the sixth form. A review of the curriculum is underway and some changes have already been made to the entry requirements for courses. The current offer does not ensure that all students have opportunities to develop skills outside their courses, learn about personal, social, health and economic education or take part in high-quality work experience.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- achievement in the sixth form improves, and leaders continue to review the provision so that it meets students' academic and vocational needs and allows them to develop a range of skills outside of their chosen courses
- middle leaders develop their skills so that they have a better understanding of how groups of pupils in their subject areas are performing, and use this information to hold teachers to account for the achievement of pupils in their classes
- teachers and teaching assistants consistently use information about pupils' starting points and progress to plan learning and homework that are appropriately challenging for pupils, especially the most able, the disadvantaged, and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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

Yours sincerely

Deirdre Duignan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and senior leaders to agree the areas of focus for the inspection. Meetings were also held with middle leaders, governors, and the school's safeguarding lead. Inspectors considered a range of documentation, including information about the attainment and progress of current pupils, records of attendance, safeguarding, behaviour and bullying, examples of the monitoring of teaching and learning and information about the use of the pupil premium. Inspectors visited learning in several lessons, and all observations were carried out jointly with school leaders. Inspectors spoke formally with two groups of pupils and informally with others in lessons and around school. There were 100 responses to Parent View, 96 responses to the pupil survey and 44 responses to the staff survey; inspectors reviewed these findings and shared them with school leaders.