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Mr Maurice Hall
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hall

Short inspection of The Duchess's Community High School

Following my visit to the school on 18 May 2017 with Toni Spoons, 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 September 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and other senior leaders have an honest, clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and the areas that need further development. You have implemented a range of strategies to evaluate the quality of teaching and these have led to an accurate and comprehensive self-evaluation and school improvement plan.

Since the last inspection, you and your senior leaders have embedded a rigorous approach to the monitoring, evaluation and improving of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. As a result, teachers are planning lessons that increasingly meet the needs of all groups and abilities of pupils. Middle leaders also have much clearer responsibilities for monitoring teaching and tracking the performance of key groups of pupils in their subject areas.

All staff and governors have high expectations about what pupils and sixth-form students can achieve and are fully committed to raising their aspirations and those of their families. You have created a school where pupils are achieving well, and where sixth-form students achieve exceptionally well.

Pupils enjoy being at this school. They are well cared for by your staff. Your curriculum is planned to maximise pupils' learning opportunities and is broad and balanced. The extra-curricular opportunities provided are plentiful and help to support pupils develop their confidence and wider personal and social skills.

The strong focus on raising aspirations through careers education ensures that all pupils and students who continue into the sixth form are well prepared for the next stages of their lives. Almost all pupils in Year 11 and all sixth-form students move on to appropriate further or higher education, employment or training. This is as a result of your well-planned activities for pupils to access a range of information and guidance from local employers and links with universities.

Provision in the sixth form is a strength of the school. Achievement in both academic and vocational subjects is well above the national averages, as is the achievement of disadvantaged students in the sixth form. Retention rates from Year 12 to Year 13 are strong, along with the support and guidance for students wanting to go on to higher education at university. Sixth-form students are excellent role models to the younger pupils in the school.

Differences in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally are showing signs of diminishing. However, their attendance and the progress they make still lag behind others. You and your leadership team recognise that this needs addressing. You are already directing appropriate improvement strategies at these areas. For example, embedded classroom routines that teachers now have to identify and target disadvantaged pupils are allowing those pupils to make progress in line with other pupils. Even so, further work is needed.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that all safeguarding requirements are met. You maintain detailed and secure records of any incidents, including bullying and racism, along with actions taken to address any issues.

Staff receive training to recognise and respond to safeguarding concerns appropriately and effectively. The pastoral team works efficiently to support pupils with any worries that they may have and to make sure that they are safe. Pupils say that staff are very approachable; pupils know who to go to if they have any worries.

Pupils feel safe in school and are confident that any issues will be tackled quickly. They are confident that the curriculum helps them to explore the risks they could face in the local community and online. Pupils talked confidently about the ways in which they could reduce these risks and keep themselves safe. Parents also agree that their children are safe in school.

Inspection findings

- In 2016, the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 lagged behind that of other pupils in the school and nationally. Inspectors looked closely at the progress made by current disadvantaged pupils. The range of strategies introduced to raise their achievement is starting to pay off. Teachers now have embedded routines for identifying pupils. They are becoming increasingly skilled at using different approaches, such as questioning pupils effectively and taking

steps to consolidate and extend their knowledge and understanding.

Furthermore, a mentoring programme enables these pupils to access support they need academically, socially and emotionally. As a result, disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress; their progress is now similar to that of their peers. Leaders are also now checking with greater rigour that the pupil premium funding is used to good effect. However, you acknowledge that there is still more to do to fully evaluate the impact of the strategies on raising disadvantaged pupils' achievement. You are already working with your 'Pupil Premium Champion' to carry out this important work.

- The leadership of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is strong and effective. Leaders and other staff who work closely with these pupils have a clear understanding of the challenges the pupils face. They closely and regularly monitor their progress in reaching academic, attendance and other targets. Currently, many pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress. Leaders ensure that additional support and intervention is quickly provided so pupils make equally good progress to others.
- Inspectors looked closely at the quality of sixth-form provision, student outcomes, and how well prepared students are for their next steps. Sixth-form leadership is strong. The wide range of enrichment activities and charity events enables students to develop as individuals exceptionally well. Students are positive, caring and respectful. They value and appreciate the high quality of personal development and welfare opportunities they receive. Staff know the students well and this allows them to offer tailored guidance for individual students. Students are prepared very well for their next steps. All students access further education, employment or training.
- Inspectors looked at the actions leaders are taking to improve attendance. Rates of absence and persistent absence have fallen for all groups of pupils. Leaders work closely with key school staff to track pupils' attendance and welfare. Leaders are now developing more individualised approaches to support pupils' needs. While attendance is generally improving, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities still lags behind that of other pupils. Leaders acknowledge that further work is needed to address this fully.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- your current focus on monitoring and evaluating strategies to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils is maintained
- work to improve attendance continues, particularly for pupils who are disadvantaged and 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 Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Darren Stewart
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Meetings took place with you and members of your middle and senior leadership teams. Meetings also took place with the chair and four other members of the governing body, groups of pupils from Years 9 and 10 and a group of sixth-form students. Inspectors examined the school's self-evaluation document and monitoring records concerning achievement, teaching and learning, performance management, attendance and exclusions and destinations. The single central record was checked and relevant safeguarding procedures were reviewed. Learning walks to observe learning in each key stage were conducted with members of the senior leadership team. No responses to Ofsted's online pupil and staff surveys were received. Inspectors received and considered 121 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents.