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Mr Andrew Mason
Head of School
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Dear Mr Mason

Short inspection of Northgate High School

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 2017 with Ofsted inspectors Jacqueline Thornalley and John Wilson, 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 previous inspection.

Together with the chief executive of the recently formed multi-academy trust, you, your senior leaders and governors are leading the school with determination. You have clear ideas for how the school can continue to improve. During a period of significant change, including changes to sixth-form leadership arrangements, the team has kept the school on track. In an inclusive environment, staff typically promote high expectations and provide effective support so that most pupils move successfully to the next stage of their education, training or employment.

The school's evaluation of its own performance is honest and accurate. You and other senior leaders know what is working well and what needs to be changed. Your recently restructured middle leadership team spoke enthusiastically with me about the range of professional development opportunities, as well as the increasingly strong focus on accountability for pupils' progress at all levels. This focus is clear in the regular monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment taking place in departments, across subjects and in lessons. The well-managed system of support and challenge helps individual teachers and subject areas to improve through an intensive programme of coaching and review. These factors combine to ensure that teaching continues to be effective.

In planning for further improvement, you are placing even more emphasis on checking how well teaching is helping the different groups of pupils to make good progress. Quite rightly, the plan highlights your work to accelerate the progress of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who enter the school with low prior attainment in English and mathematics. It sets out the detail of how senior leaders are ensuring that standards continue to improve across subjects and that the most able pupils achieve their best in GCSE examinations. For example, you are working to increase the progress higher-ability boys make in English. This is because this group did not reach their full potential in the published results in 2016.

Typically, pupils behave well in lessons and around school. The difference the new 'attitudes to learning' policy, developed by pupils, staff, parents and governors, is making to standards of behaviour is carefully checked. You know that a small number of pupils do not always live up to the high expectations set out in the policy. Because of this, you and other leaders are working to make sure that interventions are more effective and that all staff apply the rewards and sanctions model consistently.

As part of your work to continually improve pupils' attitudes to learning, you give high priority to ensuring that attendance is regular and that the incidence of persistent absence is reducing. In your communications with parents, you rightly make the links between pupils' good attendance and good progress crystal clear.

You have also prioritised your commitment to raising literacy standards and to promoting a love of reading across the school. This is underpinned by the work of your literacy librarian. I enjoyed hearing about pupils' successes in external creative writing competitions and charity 'readathons' and about the popular programme of author visits. These activities are contributing very effectively to improving the reading skills of pupils who did not achieve the expected standards when they joined in Year 7.

The school's provision for 16- to 19-year-olds is ensuring that most sixth-form students achieve well. The chief executive of the multi-academy trust explained to me how, when the partner school declared its intention to withdraw from shared sixth-form management arrangements, swift action was taken to secure stability and maintain the confidence of staff, students and parents. The success of this action is testimony to senior leaders' and governors' work.

As of 1 March 2017, the school's status changed from a single academy when, together with two local primary schools, one infant school and one infant and nursery school, it became part of a new multi-academy trust, the Unity Education Trust. Future planning is grounded in a commitment to ongoing improvement across the primary and secondary phases of the education provided in trust schools.

Safeguarding is effective.

You give high priority to keeping the pupils in your care safe. Safeguarding roles are clear. Responsibilities are well understood by staff at all levels. Procedures are

rigorous. Records are detailed and thorough. Governors and senior leaders check to make sure that the information held about staff recruitment is complete and compliant with current regulations. The required staff training is in place. Staff are regularly updated on important issues, such as the 'Prevent' duty, children missing from education and domestic violence reporting.

In their meetings with inspectors, pupils in key stages 3 and 4, and students in the sixth form, explained how the school helps them to keep safe in different situations, including online and when using mobile phones and social networking sites. They told inspectors that they feel safe in school, that bullying is rare and that it is dealt with appropriately if it happens.

Inspection findings

- In our initial meeting, we agreed some lines of enquiry for inspectors to follow. This was to ensure that I could gather sufficient evidence to confirm the school continues to provide a good standard of education. My first line of enquiry was to consider the impact of leaders' actions on improving disadvantaged pupils' progress. This was because published examination outcomes in 2016 indicated that this group, in particular lower-ability boys, did not make the same progress or attain as well as other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.
- In our discussions, school leaders were able to give detailed accounts of the very specific circumstances of the disadvantaged pupils whose progress fell short of national expectations last year. Individual case studies track particular and often complex needs, leading to programmes of support and intervention focused, appropriately, on retaining vulnerable pupils in education.
- Although current in-year assessment information suggests that disadvantaged pupils are making better progress, you are not complacent. Together with other senior colleagues, you have taken steps to sustain the continuous improvement of provision for disadvantaged groups, for example through the work of the English and mathematics intervention coordinators, linked to a designated senior leader, in supporting and tracking the progress of this group and the progress of Year 7 pupils who need to catch up.
- All staff are fully aware that disadvantaged pupils' progress is of high priority in the school. As part of wider, ongoing improvements, your literacy librarian works closely with teachers to promote the importance of reading and to help implement any interventions needed. These strategies are effective in raising the standards of pupils' reading and writing skills across the school. They make an important contribution to assessment information which suggests that, over time, the differences are diminishing between the progress of Northgate High School's disadvantaged pupils and the progress of other pupils nationally.
- My next line of enquiry was to consider whether teaching is meeting the needs of different groups of pupils and if the good-quality teaching noted at the previous inspection is continuing. In my discussions with middle leaders, the increasingly strong focus on accountability was made clear. Roles and responsibilities are well defined. Checks on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are frequent and rigorous. Your middle leaders explained to me how the school's common

system of assessment, based on GCSE criteria and national expectations of prior attainment at the end of key stage 2, is being used. This work is securing more precise tracking of pupils' progress and interventions to meet individual pupils' needs, including the most able, disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

- Close monitoring is ensuring that plans are in place to address weaknesses in underperforming subjects and aspects of teaching that still need to improve. As part of this process, routine checks on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment highlight very specific improvement priorities. For example, the effectiveness of teachers' application of the school's marking and 'disadvantaged first' policies is a current focus of middle leaders' reviews of teaching quality in their areas of responsibility. Checks ensure that the professional development of staff is targeted at individual, departmental and whole-school needs.
- Governors are acutely aware of their role in ensuring that teaching is effective and that additional funding is used well to improve outcomes for the target groups. They know that these responsibilities cover the funding to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding. Discussions with staff and pupils about the quality and effectiveness of provision for all groups are an important feature of governors' regular visits to the school.
- Working together, you and other senior leaders rightly acknowledge that there is still work to be done, for example to ensure that higher-ability boys achieve well in English and that standards continue to improve for all pupils, in particular in modern foreign languages and computing.
- In noting the good standard of pupils' behaviour, as judged at the previous inspection, we agreed that my third line of enquiry would focus on the below-average attendance and high persistent absence rates of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. It is very clear that communications between parents, students and the school's attendance improvement team have a high profile and are systematic and regular. Tracking is rigorous and carefully monitored. Interventions, including home visits and work with external agencies, are leading to improvements in individual cases. Nevertheless, you acknowledge that the rate of persistent absence for the specific groups we considered is not reducing fast enough at this stage.
- My final line of enquiry was to consider provision in the sixth form, in particular in light of recent management changes. Inspectors agreed that 16 to 19 programmes continue to be implemented effectively. Most students and their parents share this view. Sixth-form lessons are typically well taught. Students generally progress well and are appropriately prepared for the next stage in their education, employment or training. In line with the planning for continuous improvement underway in other year groups, sixth-form leaders are working to ensure that all groups achieve their full potential. They told inspectors in their discussions with them about the particular focus on increasing the proportion of students who gain the highest grades in their A-level examinations.
- Inspectors noted the good standards of behaviour in the sixth form. Some students take on wider school responsibilities, including reading mentor roles

with younger pupils. You are considering more ways to involve older students in wider school life. The sixth-form offer includes Dereham Education and Soccer Academy courses. These courses are offered in collaboration with Dereham Town Football Club. The provision is popular and effective in tailoring post-16 programmes for students who may not have otherwise chosen to stay on in education at the end of Year 11.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the work to improve pupils' attendance is rigorous and sustained, so that attendance for all groups is at least in line with the national average and that persistent absence continues to reduce
- the differences between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and others nationally continue to diminish
- the remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and outcomes across subjects are addressed.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We held meetings with you, other senior leader, middle leaders, governors, groups of pupils and the chief executive of the recently formed multi-academy trust. Inspectors observed pupils' learning and looked at their work in short visits to a wide range of lessons. Most of these visits were undertaken jointly with members of the senior leadership team. We reviewed school documents, including policies, the school's self-evaluation and the associated improvement plan. We also looked at safeguarding records and information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance. In addition, we considered 72 free-text comments from parents and 89 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, alongside 85 questionnaires returned by pupils and 48 from staff.