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Mr David Cane
Acting principal
Darwen Aldridge Community Academy
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Dear Mr Cane

Short inspection of Darwen Aldridge Community Academy

Following my visit to the school on 23 May 2017 with Jackie Cahalin, 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 January 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, the school governors and the multi-academy trust share a vision for the school to help drive Darwen's regeneration. The school stands like a beacon in the heart of Darwen and by providing consistently good-quality education, you are beginning to realise that ambition. You are raising the aspirations of most of your pupils. They clearly enjoy and, very importantly, value their education. Two of the most striking successes are the inspirational work produced by art students and the success of the school's sixth form provision.

School leaders have created a highly positive and industrious culture. Pupils work well in lessons and have a very positive attitude to their work. Pupils say most teachers provide activities and topics that they find interesting. They are very complimentary about the additional support that teachers provide. Although it is a larger than average school, pupils feel they receive highly personalised academic and pastoral guidance.

Teaching of mathematics has improved considerably. Now, the department performs consistently well. Leaders and teachers within the science department have managed considerable change very effectively and pupils are now performing well in all aspects of science. The effectiveness of teaching across the humanities and modern foreign language departments has been much less effective. You have

taken steps to improve this; however, it is too early to evaluate, with any degree of confidence, the effect of the changes you have made.

Pupils take part in an extensive range of enriching activities and experiences. The school's focus on enterprise gives a wealth of opportunities for pupils to develop important employability skills like teamwork, project management and communication skills. You and other staff broaden the experiences of pupils, developing their local and international cultural understanding.

The school is good and improving because leadership, at all levels, is strong. Systems to monitor the impact of the work of the school are effective and informative. Senior leaders are able to review and evaluate all aspects of the school's work. From this secure understanding, leaders plan well for improvement and implement effective strategies. Teachers' and leaders' responsibilities are clearly understood and all staff are rigorously held to account.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your leadership team have ensured that all arrangements to promote safeguarding are efficient and effective. All staff are suitably trained. They are aware of their responsibilities and are vigilant. The school has developed good relationships with other agencies that have responsibilities to protect children. Systems to ensure only suitable people are recruited to the school meet requirements. The open and very supportive culture of the school helps pupils feel safe and they are safe.

Inspection findings

- Overall and since the last inspection, pupils have continued to make good progress. However, there have been some groups of pupils and some subjects that have not achieved as well as others.
- Both low- and middle-ability pupils have made strong progress. The most able have not progressed quite as well. The difference between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others is diminishing, but not quickly. Progress made by pupils in humanities and in modern foreign languages has been weaker than in other subjects. Part of the explanation of why there has been this inconsistent progress lies with a poorly designed curriculum. Previously, pupils completed their studies in some subjects, including humanities and modern foreign languages, at the end of Year 10. At this stage, they were not all ready for their GCSE examination as they had not studied these subjects for long enough at secondary level. In addition, too few most-able pupils were taking courses that matched their potential. For example, only a small proportion of high-ability pupils took three separate sciences at GCSE.
- The curriculum structure for the current Year 10 has been re-organised to eliminate these weaknesses. A much greater proportion of high-attaining pupils are taking GCSEs that better meet their aspirations. The curriculum for the current Year 11 retains some of the legacy from the previous structure. Your leadership team has made significant adjustments to ensure that GCSE courses

conclude at the end of Year 11.

- The quality of teaching has been inconsistent across subjects. A minority of teachers do not have high enough expectations of what the most able pupils in their classes can achieve. Consequently, they do not always enable these pupils to excel. Across the school, the performance of disadvantaged pupils is improving. Teachers are aware which pupils in their classes are disadvantaged and monitor their work particularly carefully. However, there are a significant number of disadvantaged pupils who have very complex barriers to reaching their potential. The school fully understands these barriers and works well with a range of agencies to support these particular pupils.
- Pupils join the school with low standards in basic literacy and numeracy. You, other leaders and many teachers have worked hard over recent years to improve pupils' basic skills and this has begun to help improve pupils' progress across all subjects. You have a good strategy to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. This strategy is communicated through the school's literacy and numeracy policy. The school has had most impact on improving the basic skills of pupils whose starting points were particularly weak and who have had specialist support. For example, the weakest 35 readers in Years 7 and 8 improved, on average, their reading ages by two years in one. When planning lessons, some teachers follow the school policy and deliberately seek opportunities to improve pupils' basic skills. These teachers also check pupils' work for basic errors and give good advice on how to improve. However, not all teachers follow the policy and this disadvantages their pupils.
- The sixth form goes from strength to strength. It caters for students with a very broad range of interests by offering many different courses. Students have made consistently good progress over recent years. Very few students leave the sixth form before the natural end of their courses. In addition, an increasing number are progressing on to what are considered to be Britain's best universities. Many students are the first in their families to go to university. Careers guidance is good and an increasing number of students are moving on to modern apprenticeships. The school purposefully promotes students' personal development and their leadership skills very well. All students participate in good-quality and meaningful work experience that relates to their aspirations.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- Further improve the achievement of the most able pupils by ensuring that:
 - the curriculum continues to adapt to meet their needs and aspirations
 - all teachers have the highest expectations of what the most able pupils can achieve and plan learning activities that enable them to reach their full potential.
- Further improve the quality of teaching overall by eliminating any residual weak and inconsistent practice.

- Do all they can to ensure any barriers to disadvantaged pupils progressing are broken down and ensure that teachers continue to pay these pupils particular attention.
- Ensure all staff promote pupils' basics skills in literacy and numeracy by following the school's policy, paying particular attention to:
 - all teachers incorporating activities into their lessons that help pupils develop these basic skills
 - all teachers correcting errors in literacy and numeracy and giving pupils guidance on how to improve.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Mackenzie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the inspectors held meetings with you, your deputies and assistant headteachers, and the head of sixth form. We met with the executive principal and a representative of the multi-academy trust. We also met with groups of pupils and four members of the governing body. School documents were scrutinised including: safeguarding checks, information about pupils' achievement and records of checks on the quality of teaching. We also visited classrooms with your leaders to speak with pupils, look at their work and observe their learning. An inspector visited tutor time. We examined child protection information. We took account of the 74 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. We also considered the responses from 38 pupils and 66 staff to inspection surveys. The views expressed by parents, pupils and staff through the school's own surveys were also taken into consideration. I considered the views of the 52 parents who shared their comments via free text.