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Mr Mark Maydew
Principal
Erasmus Darwin Academy
Pool Road
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Dear Mr Maydew

Short inspection of Erasmus Darwin Academy

Following my visit to the school on 18 January 2018 with Ofsted Inspectors Tracey Lord and Thomas Walton, 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 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You, your leaders and all staff show a genuine desire for pupils to be safe and happy while they achieve to the best of their abilities. The quality of pastoral care in the school and the school's ethos of 'excellence for all' stand out.

You know your school very well, including its strengths and weaknesses. Your self-evaluation is accurate and understood by all, including governors. Your plans to address the few areas that need to improve are clear and appropriate and are underpinned by detailed action plans.

Erasmus Darwin Academy is a strong community and relationships are exemplary across the school. Morale is high. Members of staff who spoke with inspectors said that they are proud to work at the school. Parents and carers value your leadership and the education that the school provides for their children. An overwhelming majority of parents who responded to Parent View agreed that the school is well led and said that they would recommend the school to another parent. Many commented positively about the high-quality pastoral care the school provides and said that their child is happy and safe at school.

Over time, pupils at key stage 4 make progress that is at least in line with other pupils nationally. For example, pupils' progress in mathematics has improved

markedly. While some groups make strong progress, disadvantaged pupils and most-able pupils have performed less well in some subjects. You and your leaders know that the progress of those pupils needs to improve further, especially in languages. You have already got actions plans in place to tackle this issue, although it is too early to see an impact on outcomes yet. You and your leaders are clear that there is still some way to go to ensure that all pupil groups make the progress that they are capable of.

At the previous inspection, you were charged with improving teaching by ensuring that teachers use questioning techniques effectively to gauge pupils' understanding and provide consistent challenge, especially for the most able and disadvantaged pupils. Teaching is strong in most subjects and the great majority of pupils achieve very well as a result. For example, teaching is particularly effective in English, mathematics and science. However, some less effective teaching remains, especially in languages.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership of safeguarding is strong, as is the scrutiny provided by the governing body. All staff understand that keeping pupils safe is their top priority. They are well trained and regularly updated about safeguarding issues. Consequently, members of staff are vigilant and readily pass on any concerns they have about pupils. You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality.

All pupils that we spoke to during the inspection said that they feel safe in school. They said that bullying is rare and that staff deal well with any that does happen. The curriculum includes regular teaching on how to stay safe, including from potential dangers that can arise when using the internet and social-media platforms. As a result, pupils have a good understanding of these issues. Parents who completed Parent View said that their children are safe in school, as did all members of staff we spoke to.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have recently introduced new systems to monitor and track the performance of the school. These systems allow leaders to put well-focused plans in place to address any areas of underperformance. As a result, many areas of previous weakness have improved and are now strong. For example, outcomes in mathematics have improved considerably and pupils are now making progress that is at least in line with other pupils nationally.
- The school's curriculum offers a wide range of learning experiences, both in and outside of the classroom. Pupils have the opportunity to study a range of academic and vocational courses at key stage 4 and in the sixth form. The curriculum is enlivened by extra-curricular activities which pupils value. Leaders regularly analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and adapt it as necessary. For example, leaders recognised the underperformance in languages and have acted swiftly to address this issue. Now languages are no longer a

compulsory subject. Instead, pupils opt into studying a language based on their interests and next steps in education.

- The school's assessment systems have been restructured recently. Leaders are now able to track, monitor and spot trends over time more easily. This allows them to act swiftly to put highly effective intervention strategies in place. As a result, pupils who need to catch up do so quickly and outcomes have improved. Leaders' use of target-setting is less effective. Targets set for pupils are too generic and do not consistently take different abilities and individual circumstances into account. As a result of this, less than half of last year's Year 11 pupils achieved their target grades. The proportion was even lower for the most able pupils.
- The experience of students in the sixth form is having a positive impact on their progress. Retention is high because staff make sure that students are on courses that are appropriate for them and that they are well supported throughout their time in the sixth form. Students demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning and act as role models to younger peers. They are complimentary about their sixth-form experience and would recommend it to others. All students benefit from personalised advice and guidance about their next steps. As a result of this, the vast majority move on to university, apprenticeships or training. Approximately one fifth of students move on to employment from the sixth form. Currently, not all students benefit from work experience placements. Leaders are aware of this and are introducing compulsory volunteering and/or work experience placements for all students in the summer term of this academic year.
- Pupils are friendly, courteous and well behaved. Pupils' behaviour in lessons and at social times is good. The school is a calm learning environment. Leaders have introduced a new behaviour policy which is clear and followed by staff and pupils. As a result, the number of pupils being excluded from school has fallen significantly. Attendance figures for all pupil groups are at least in line with the national average.
- In 2017, leaders took the decision to enter all pupils in Year 10 for their GCSE English Literature examination. Results show that too few of the most able pupils achieved a GCSE grade 7 or above. This highlights that pupils' outcomes are not as strong as they could have been had pupils had more time to study the qualification. Pupils have not had sufficient time to deepen their knowledge and acquire the necessary skills to gain the higher grades. Leaders entered them too early, before they were ready. Leaders acknowledge this and plans are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils are not entered for examinations before they are ready, to enable them to make maximum progress
- target-setting is aspirational while, at the same time, taking account of individual

pupils' needs and abilities to ensure that it motivates them to achieve their best.

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

Yours sincerely

Bianka Zemke
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you and other leaders. We visited 22 parts of lessons during the day with you or other senior leaders, where we observed teaching and learning and spoke with pupils about their work. We talked with many pupils in lessons and at breaktime and lunchtime. I met with the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. We scrutinised several documents, including your self-evaluation, minutes of governing body meetings and safeguarding records. We considered 147 responses to Parent View, including parents' free-text comments.