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Mr David Lees  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Lees

### **Short inspection of Saxmundham Free School**

Following my visit to the school on 20 February 2018 with Gerard Batty, 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 2014.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following some disappointing results after the last inspection, changes were made to the school and the trust's leadership. This was done to provide the school with further capacity to improve, and enable leaders to hold staff more accountable for making improvements. This prompt action has worked. The school is now securely good. It is poised to develop further as pupil numbers rise and its reputation in the local area grows.

You set the tone for the school's high aspirations, and for the equally high expectations of pupils and staff. You show a thorough understanding of what the school does well, and what it needs to improve upon. Trust leaders acknowledge your proven leadership. They have asked you to lead both Saxmundham Free School and another of the trust's schools from April 2018. Suitable plans are in place for you and your able team of senior leaders to build on the good outcomes achieved so far, and continue to secure further improvement.

#### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Safeguarding policy and procedures are firmly established. All necessary checks are made when appointing adults to work with children. Two designated leaders share responsibility for managing concerns raised by staff about pupils' safety and welfare, and for overseeing arrangements to keep vulnerable pupils safe. Details of serious concerns are carefully logged and followed up with local support agencies, parents and carers. Staff training, including 'Prevent' duty, is kept up to date.

## Inspection findings

- To determine whether the school remained good, we followed four lines of enquiry during the inspection. These were based on the issues raised in the last inspection, the school's recent performance information and an analysis of the school's and the trust's websites. We focused on: the actions taken by leaders, governors and the trust to improve the school since the last inspection, and the impact this is having; what prevents a higher proportion of pupils attaining the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) qualification, and leaders' plans to improve this; whether the school is a safe, stimulating and enjoyable place to be; and the effectiveness of the school's arrangements to safeguard pupils.
- Following its opening in 2012 as a new school, the first GCSE examinations were held in 2015. Staff had only a limited amount of time to ensure that the Year 11 pupils were fully prepared. Overall results achieved that year were low. Trust leaders received a warning letter from the Department for Education due to unacceptably low standards.
- Since then, results have risen significantly. The good outcomes achieved in 2017 reflect the determined work of leaders to raise expectations, strengthen teaching and provide an environment in which pupils with different needs and interests can integrate and thrive. Last year, pupils in Year 11 made strong progress, attaining half a grade higher overall than other pupils nationally. Progress in English was exceptional. All groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, made good progress.
- Observations of pupils at work in lessons, and a review of the school's recent assessments, confirm that this trend of improvement is set to continue. Currently, pupils in all year groups are benefiting from good-quality teaching that is enabling them to make good progress. All pupils have personal targets in their books which are reviewed regularly to ensure that they remain on track to meet them. A range of interventions and additional support are provided for pupils at risk of underachieving.
- Difficulties in recruiting new leaders have been overcome by harnessing the talents of key staff within the school to form a senior team capable of leading improvements. Their actions have led to notable improvements in teaching and pastoral care, and the development of the leadership of some subjects in which pupils have underperformed. Trust leaders acknowledge that this team is relatively new but feel that, under your strong leadership, leaders will continue to develop their senior roles and responsibilities.
- High-quality pastoral care, founded on the trust's 'Six Cs to success' of cooperation, commitment, confidence, community, challenge and celebration, underpins much of the school's work. It has a strong caring ethos in which pupils feel valued and safe. Pupils say that 'There is a good sense of community, where everyone knows you well, and staff and pupils are friendly.' Pupils wear their 'hero' badges, awarded for good work, with pride.
- Tutors and pastoral leads forge good relations with pupils, and oversee their care

and welfare well. Pupils feel safe and can approach any staff if they have concerns. Lunchtimes provide excellent, daily opportunities for pupils and staff to eat and socialise together. An extended school day enables pupils to engage in a range of enrichment activities, gain from one-to-one mentoring and attend additional study sessions.

- The vast majority of pupils behave well. The school is an inclusive, calm and purposeful place to be. As the school grows in size, a small but increasing minority of pupils arrive with challenging behaviours. Some have struggled to meet the high expectations teachers have of them. Exclusions from school have risen recently. Trust leaders are monitoring this carefully; they check that a range of other sanctions are applied before this course of action is taken.
- At the last inspection, leaders were asked to gain greater consistency in teaching. Observations by inspectors, carried out jointly with senior leaders, confirmed that this has been achieved. Regular training within and across other schools in the trust has enabled staff to learn from each other, share resources and improve their practice. Decisive action has been taken when staff are unable to meet leaders' raised expectations. Lesson observations, carried out jointly with senior leaders, confirmed that they are able to identify accurately the strengths and weaknesses of teaching, and the impact this has on learning.
- In lessons, most pupils display good behaviour and positive attitudes. They are respectful, attentive and eager to contribute. Teachers are adept at questioning pupils to get them thinking hard and provide high-quality, detailed answers. In study support lessons, pupils' oracy skills are well developed through topical discussion. They listen carefully to the views of others and are confident to challenge opinions different to their own. However, their books show that not all teachers use this time well enough to improve pupils' literacy skills.
- Where teachers make full use of assessment information to plan suitably challenging learning, and provide pupils with regular feedback to help them improve, pupils make rapid and sustained progress. This is not fully established across all subjects. Inspectors found that, at times, some lower- and middle-ability pupils are not set suitable tasks or given the support they need to ensure that they can get on promptly with their work. Not all teachers insist on pupils presenting their work neatly, or expect them to complete all of their work.
- Work to develop leadership and the quality of teaching and learning in science and a small number of foundation subjects is showing an improving trend. However, pupils do not yet achieve in science and languages at the same rate as they do in English and mathematics. This presents a significant barrier to increasing the proportion of pupils attaining the EBacc qualification. More effective leadership and new staff in science are beginning to lead to improvement. In French, newly appointed staff have helped to stabilise the department. Additional curriculum time has been allocated to both of these subjects. Leaders are also providing further challenge for staff to raise achievement in design technology and art. Overall results in these subjects are expected to rise this year.
- The large majority of parents who responded by text and on Parent View during the inspection praised much of the school's work and would recommend the

school to others. A few expressed that they would like better communication with staff about their child's progress and a prompt response to any concerns they may have. Leaders have prioritised increasing their engagement with parents in their current plans for improvement.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils achieve equally as well in science and a small number of foundation subjects as they do in English and mathematics
- all teachers make full use of assessment information to plan learning, provide pupils with regular feedback to help them improve, and insist on high-quality presentation of their work.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local advisory board, the chair of the Seckford Foundation Free Schools Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Suffolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, we met with you and your team of senior leaders, two groups of pupils and three members of the trust board. We also attended an early morning briefing to introduce ourselves to staff. We spent time outside of lessons meeting informally with pupils during breaktime and lunchtime. You and two of your senior leaders joined us to observe pupils at work in lessons. We reviewed your self-evaluation and improvement planning, safeguarding policy and procedures, including the single central record, and records of behaviour and attendance. We considered 62 free-text responses and 89 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 23 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for staff. No responses to the questionnaire for pupils were received.