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Mr Shawn Fell
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Dear Mr Fell

Short inspection of Harlington Upper School

Following my visit to the school on 15 March 2018 with Martin Brown and Susan Pryor, Ofsted Inspectors, 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 October 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 and your senior team have created a culture of high expectations that every pupil, regardless of their background or circumstances, can succeed. You have ensured that these aspirations have been translated into strong achievement. Outcomes have improved since the last inspection. The overall progress that pupils make at key stage 4 has, on average, been consistently in line with, or better than, the progress made by pupils nationally. In 2017, pupils made progress which was in line with the national average, whether they joined the school with below-average, average or above-average attainment. Students make similarly strong overall progress in the sixth form.

Pupils typically behave well around the carefully maintained school site. The large majority move purposefully and swiftly to lessons and arrive ready to learn. They mix easily and sociably at lunchtime, making sensible use of the school's central concourse. Older pupils usually set a good example to their younger peers. Lessons are purposeful and productive. Relationships within the classroom are overwhelmingly positive and pupils work hard. Pupils appreciate the rewards and recognition that they can achieve for progress and contributions to the school community, and the leadership roles available to them. They do say that they would appreciate an even greater number of extra-curricular opportunities.

The previous inspection report asked the school to improve the overall quality of

teaching, particularly in regard to stretching the most able pupils. The school has been successful in this, and the amount of progress pupils make, including that made by high prior-attaining pupils, has improved markedly as a result. In 2017, your most able pupils were the highest-performing ability group at key stage 4. The last inspection challenged the school to develop pupils' learning skills. The school has worked hard to strengthen pupils' resilience in their learning and to ensure that pupils understand their personal strengths and weaknesses as learners. In doing so, the school has helped pupils to live up to the school's longstanding motto: 'Know thyself'.

The previous inspection report also challenged the school to strengthen the leadership of subject departments. The school has done this effectively. Subject leaders are now much more centrally involved in evaluating standards within their own departments and drawing up plans for improvement. They meet regularly with a member of the senior team, who provides appropriate challenge and support. They have received relevant, focused training. New subject leaders are routinely paired with a more experienced colleague to support them. Subject leaders feel trusted as experts in their subject area. This strengthened subject leadership has contributed to the improving academic standards across the school.

School leaders acknowledge that there is a good deal more to do to improve the school further if it is to move towards becoming outstanding. They have developed effective systems for tracking pupils' progress. This enables them to track carefully the progress of groups who have not performed as strongly in the past, such as pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Members of the governing body are expert and experienced in understanding this performance information. This enables them to undertake regular and insightful discussions about standards with school leaders. School leaders and governors are particularly conscious of the ongoing need to strengthen systems for promoting positive behaviour so that improvements in attendance accelerate and the number of permanently excluded pupils falls.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have successfully focused on ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils, and this has contributed to the creation of a vigilant culture of safeguarding. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. They have had relevant safeguarding training, which is regularly updated. Staff make referrals to external agencies that are timely and appropriate. Staff follow up any concerns methodically. Information is shared effectively with parents and carers when it is appropriate, and constructive working relationships with other agencies help to keep pupils safe.

A very large majority of pupils and parents say that pupils feel very safe at the school. Opportunities for developing pupils' understanding of how to stay safe are successfully threaded throughout the curriculum. These are found in assemblies, tutorial periods and subject lessons across the school. This includes helping pupils

to deal with any risks that they may routinely face, including the use of the internet and social networking sites. The school deals quickly and decisively with any poor behaviour which does occur, including bullying.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to investigate the extent to which the school is ensuring effectively that strong overall progress is reflected in the progress made by the most vulnerable pupils in the school. In 2017, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities made progress which was markedly below that of their peers.
- The school has introduced and embedded a range of effective strategies for accelerating the progress of disadvantaged pupils. For example, the school's distinctive 'FAB' strategy (feedback, adaptation, books) ensures that teachers prioritise the learning of disadvantaged pupils in their classroom whenever they explain misconceptions, plan tasks or mark work. The 2017 results do not fairly reflect the achievements of disadvantaged pupils. Most pupils within this group achieved well. The school's assessment information about pupils currently in the school shows that disadvantaged pupils are making very rapid progress throughout the school. Evidence from this inspection supports this.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are also now making stronger progress. However, school leaders accept that teachers' thorough knowledge about the individual needs of these pupils is not being translated into practical classroom strategies as consistently as it is for disadvantaged pupils. The leadership of this area has recently changed, and a range of developments have been made as a result. The full impact of these plans is yet to be seen across the school and there has not been sufficient time to evaluate fully the relative effectiveness of these developments.
- My second line of enquiry was to investigate how successfully the school is working to ensure that the progress pupils make in all subjects is as strong as the progress they make in the highest-performing subject areas. In 2017, progress in both English and mathematics was significantly above the national averages for those subjects. However, the overall performance of pupils in the English Baccalaureate and open elements of the school's published performance information was not as strong.
- A closer analysis of this 2017 performance information shows that, in reality, individual subjects within these elements performed well. Pupils in science, humanities and modern foreign languages all made progress which was above the national average. This was mirrored in the performance of a large majority of other GCSE courses. School leaders have now changed the way pupils choose courses for their key stage 4 curriculum, and this now encourages more pupils to take a greater number of high-value academic subjects. School leaders were able to explain a range of strategies which have been put in place to promote even greater consistency in outcomes across all subjects. Evidence from this inspection supports the evaluation that these are having a positive impact.

- I was also keen to investigate the performance of students in the school's sixth form. This is because, although overall outcomes were positive in 2017, there were some elements of students' progress which were not as strong as others. Students did not perform as well at AS level as they did in their A levels; girls did not make as much progress as boys.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form, and the standards of achievement of students studying there, remains strong. The sixth form is well led. The progress students make is meticulously monitored. Students say that they are well guided and supported, and their attitudes to their learning are highly positive. The school's current performance information shows that not only have overall standards remained positive, but also that girls are achieving at least as well as, and in many subjects better than, boys. The school no longer routinely enters students for AS levels at the end of Year 12.
- My final line of enquiry was to investigate how successfully the school has worked to reduce both pupil absence and the number of pupils who are permanently excluded from the school. This was because overall attendance has remained slightly below the national average over the last three years. The number of permanent exclusions has, over time, also been greater than that of other schools nationally.
- School leaders have adopted a number of strategies to promote improved attendance. These have included the strengthening of monitoring processes, targeted work with specific individuals, and a programme of clear messages, articulated through assemblies and tutor times, about the academic benefits of regular attendance. The school has successfully reduced persistent absence and sustained this at levels which are below the national average. However, while there has been some improvement in overall attendance this year, it has not been sufficient to bring it into line with the average for levels of attendance achieved at other schools nationally.
- The sanction of permanent exclusion has been applied for serious, but isolated, incidents of poor behaviour which are not typical of behaviour at the school. These decisions have each been consistent with the school's behaviour policy. They have been appropriately tested by the governing body and communication with the local authority has been clear and effective. Governors and school leaders are clearly very conscious of the need to reduce permanent exclusions. They have attempted to learn lessons from each separate case in order to shape future practice and to avoid any similar situations occurring. However, because permanent exclusions have remained above the national average, it is evident that these responses have not yet had sufficient impact.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- continue to strengthen provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, so that their outcomes improve further

- improve attendance so it is at least in line with the national average
- reduce the number of permanent exclusions.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Lawrence
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, teachers, governors and various groups of pupils. We observed pupils' learning in a series of short visits to a number of lessons, and all of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team.

We scrutinised a range of school documentation, including: policies; the school's self-evaluation; the school's improvement plan; safeguarding records and information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance.

We considered the views expressed in 140 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 129 free-text responses, together with 83 questionnaires returned by pupils and 61 returned by school staff.