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Dr Janet Hunt
Headteacher
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Dear Dr Hunt

Short inspection of Diss High School

Following my visit to the school on 22 March 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 February 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 and your senior leaders have a good grasp of the school's strengths and areas for development. Your strategic school improvement processes are inclusive and promote shared leadership, involving senior and middle leaders as well as the governing body.

Pupils and students are rightly proud of their school, wear their uniform smartly and arrive punctually to their lessons. Pupils enjoy coming to school. This is reflected in their high rate of attendance compared to the national average. Pupils' attitudes in the vast majority of lessons are exemplary, and they enjoy positive relationships with their teachers and each other.

You are successful in your aim to enrich pupils' learning experiences through a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Pupils appreciate your efforts in this regard. They particularly enjoy the vast choice of sporting and musical activities, and also the opportunities they have to participate in educational visits, both in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Despite the number on the school roll steadily decreasing due to demographical reasons, you are determined to continue to offer a broad and balanced curriculum and maintain a viable sixth form, all of this within the context of ever-increasing financial challenges.

You remain a very popular school and have a waiting list for Year 7 in September 2018. One typical comment expressed by parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, is: 'This is a great school; both my children are flourishing academically, socially and emotionally.'

Teaching is typically stimulating and uses a good range of resources. You have made a concerted effort to empower your subject leaders. Although you continue to provide training on whole-school issues, such as safeguarding, you now expect them to identify specific training needs for their particular subject areas. This makes sure that they remain up to date with current trends and initiatives, and are able to better meet the targets identified in their individual subject action plans.

You have an above-average number of children who are looked after and these pupils typically achieve well over time. Similarly, other groups of pupils have made good progress over time. However, you acknowledge the rate at which pupils' progress stalled in 2017, particularly in mathematics. Of greater concern is the fact that pupils' progress in modern foreign languages has not been satisfactory for some time. Your school improvement plan identifies actions to address the 'dip' in 2017, but modern foreign languages remains a challenge and is an ongoing priority. Students achieve well in the sixth form, and many go on to study a wide range of subjects at university, including at Oxford or Cambridge.

Governors have the necessary expertise to provide an appropriate balance of challenge and support. My scrutiny of their minutes of meetings shows that they are well informed and ask pertinent questions when required. Through their various committees as well as regular visits to the school, they have a good grasp of what the school does well, and where it needs to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a strong aspect of the school. Pupils' well-being is paramount and is supported through a wealth of appropriate knowledge and experience, particularly from the designated safeguarding leads and the heads of year.

All staff have received up-to-date documentation and training. The checks carried out to make sure that staff are suitable to work with children are thorough, and are recorded appropriately on the school's single central register.

Inspectors' examination of documentation relating to pupils who are vulnerable shows that these records are securely stored, with details of discussions, actions taken, involvement of external agencies and resolutions.

Inspection findings

- I looked initially at why progress dipped at the end of key stage 4 in 2017, particularly in mathematics. Prior to this set of outcomes, progress had been consistently strong, apart from in modern languages.
- You acknowledge that you were surprised with the outcomes in mathematics in

2017. The leadership of mathematics underwent significant changes over a short period of time. You also identified, after receiving the GCSE results in mathematics, that for pupils who entered at foundation level, weaknesses in pupils' literacy had contributed towards the dip in standards. Foundation pupils struggled to decipher the meaning of the language contained in the questions, and were often unclear as to what they had to do.

- You now make more regular use of past question papers and work through these with pupils so that they can better access the questions. There is a greater emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills overall and you provide more intervention and support for pupils which starts in Year 7 and is offered to pupils in other year groups. You have also mapped out the delivery of mathematical skills across other subjects, including geography, science, and information and communication technology (ICT).
- Our discussions with your heads of English and mathematics provided reassurance that leaders have analysed the reasons for the weaker progress, and have put suitable plans in place to improve the situation for pupils currently in Year 11. Your own monitoring indicates that progress in both English and mathematics is likely to pick up for pupils who are about to sit their GCSE examinations.
- As national lead for modern languages, I was concerned about the poor outcomes over a number of years, with little sign of any improvement. Pupils of all abilities have underachieved, and examination entries are typically high.
- You have struggled both to recruit and retain modern languages teachers. You now have a permanent head of languages and have appointed a high-calibre teacher to start in September. This lack of stability in staffing had led to negative perceptions of languages by many pupils and some parents and carers. Some parents expressed negative views about language teaching in their responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.
- As a result of weak teaching over time, negative perceptions and sometimes poor behaviour in language lessons, pupils' outcomes have suffered. Your external review of modern languages in 2016 had little demonstrable impact. However, you are committed to improving languages provision, and a second external review is imminent. You are making great efforts to enhance the provision with residential trips to France and a residential exchange visit to Spain.
- My discussion with the head of modern languages and selected pupils, as well as scrutiny of pupils' books, suggests that improving modern languages provision is a key priority for the school. Some pupils resent having to take a language in key stage 4, and some pupils' poor presentation of their work reflects their negative attitude towards the subject. As the head of modern languages is new to post, more formalised and regular support is essential.
- I considered the suitability of your curriculum and the quality of guidance offered to pupils when making their option choices. This was because you have entered a high proportion of pupils over the last two years for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) qualification. The rationale for choosing this qualification has been questioned and the Department for Education is not allowing this qualification to count towards performance tables from 2018. You have also

encouraged a very high proportion of your pupils for the English Baccalaureate qualification (EBacc), which must include a modern language, when pupils have significantly underachieved in languages in the past.

- You have conducted a review of the curriculum. You confirmed that you are no longer entering pupils for the ECDL. You have directed pupils in the past towards the EBacc in order to provide them with a broad and balanced curriculum at key stage 4. However, you have carefully considered how you are guiding pupils and it is envisaged that slightly fewer pupils will follow the EBacc in 2018.
- You realise that a modern language may not always be appropriate for every pupil, but state that if a pupil wishes to study languages in key stage 4 they may do so. You have added to the option choices by including additional courses in computing, food and finance. The latter course is particularly helpful, as some pupils who responded to the online survey said that they would welcome more guidance in financial matters.
- Finally, I investigated the reasons why disadvantaged pupils make good progress in key stage 4, including for the last two years. These pupils are known by their teachers, who 'keep a careful eye' on their progress. The pupil premium fund for these pupils is used to provide one-to-one and group support, to fund additional study aids and to finance educational visits when pupils may otherwise be unable to participate. Although the fund appears to be spent in the way that it is in many other schools, you point to the fact that these pupils are very well known and receive a great deal of academic and pastoral support. Disadvantaged pupils who met with inspectors confirmed that they were very well supported.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that the modern languages provision improves significantly by:

- producing an action plan following the imminent external review of modern languages and regularly monitoring any actions taken for impact
- recruiting preferably permanent and highly qualified teachers of French and Spanish
- providing a formalised support programme for the recently appointed head of modern languages and other teachers in the department
- raising expectations of the quality of pupils' work, their attitudes towards the subject and the presentation of their work
- raising pupils' awareness of how modern languages can be used as an additional skill in the world of work.

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

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We met with you and other senior leaders, as well as middle leaders, to discuss progress since the previous inspection. We met with two members of the governing body and held a telephone discussion with the vice-chair to gain their views on the school. We met with three groups of pupils.

We scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including your self-evaluation summary document and the school's plans for improvement. We held a meeting to examine the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks that leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and information relating to behaviour and attendance.

We undertook observations of learning across the school, viewed work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning when visiting lessons. We focused particularly on English, mathematics and modern foreign languages. We took account of the views of 39 staff and 117 pupils who responded to Ofsted's online survey. We also considered the 288 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.