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Mr Jonathan Wincott
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Dear Mr Wincott

Short inspection of The Sandon School

Following my visit to the school on 22 March 2018 with Sally Nutman and Susan Sutton, 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 December 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

Pupils told inspectors how much they value the school's strong community ethos, and the way in which 'everyone helps and supports each-other'. They interact in a mature and considerate manner with staff, get to work quickly in the classroom and maintain their focus well when work is challenging. Pupils are welcoming to visitors, and were keen to talk with inspectors about the many aspects of life and work at their school which they value.

Among these is the broad curriculum; pupils can choose from a very wide range of subjects to study both at key stage 4 and in the sixth form. Effective careers information and guidance enable pupils to choose subjects and courses that fit well with their interests, ambitions and abilities. Most pupils make good progress and achieve well. As a result, all pupils who completed key stage 4 in 2017 entered into employment, further education or training. Many chose to enter the school's large sixth form and typically, post-16 students make strong progress and achieve highly. Very many make successful applications for undergraduate study.

Pupils also appreciate the calm, orderly atmosphere around the school; they told inspectors that disruption to their learning is unusual, and that more serious misbehaviour is a very rare occurrence. Often, pupils' conduct within the classroom helps to quicken the pace of learning; when teachers seek to create discussion and

debate, pupils are willing participants. Pupils listen to the views of their classmates respectfully, and are happy to be challenged to develop their thinking. Pupils, including the most able, told inspectors that these techniques deepen their learning. They help to ensure that, as one pupil commented, 'the work's just hard enough, but not so tough that you give up'. However, pupils told inspectors that the level of challenge they experience 'depends on the teacher'.

The school community is enriched via pupils' participation in the many extra activities that teachers make available to them. Opportunities include a wealth of sporting activities, dance, drama, and creative writing clubs, as well as numerous trips and visits, such as the history 'battlefields trip' to Ypres. Provision for music is a particular strength; many pupils learn a musical instrument, play in the orchestra or sing in the choir. Others serve as elected form captains, or take up leadership positions as subject ambassadors or health champions. Leaders ensure that disadvantaged pupils take up these opportunities to the same degree that other pupils do. These activities promote pupils' personal development well, and support the school's ethos of 'working together'.

Together with other leaders and governors, you are rigorous in checking the quality of the school's provision. You rightly make amendments to the curriculum so that pupils study the right courses or are entered for the appropriate examination papers in particular subjects, given their abilities. You identified that in the past some pupils did not achieve well in science because they were entered for the 'triple science' option at GCSE, which was too difficult for them. You have ensured that current pupils are studying for science qualifications that are a good fit, given their abilities. Leaders have analysed last year's GCSE mathematics results carefully, and have identified where pupils did not perform well. Teachers are putting particular emphasis on these topics and techniques, and are adapting sequences of learning appropriately.

Governors share your commitment to keep refining the school's curriculum so that it meets the needs of all pupils. They understand the school's key strengths and what needs to improve. Governors challenge you and other leaders robustly. They seek additional information about the quality of aspects of the school's provision – including through visits and via independent reviews. They are particularly rigorous in ensuring that policies, procedures and provision all help to keep pupils safe. Governors have identified that teachers would welcome the opportunity to learn from each other. They are supportive of the plans you have put in place to facilitate this and to ensure that the most effective teaching techniques are both shared and widely adopted.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Leaders and governors ensure that the correct checks are carried out before staff are appointed, and that all adults receive regular safeguarding training. This ensures that staff understand the kinds of risks that young people can be vulnerable to, including those that are specific to the school's locality, and how to spot any

changes in behaviour, appearance or attendance that might indicate an issue of concern.

Staff follow the correct procedures in such cases, passing on any and all concerns. Leaders act with both sensitivity and determination to ensure that pupils get appropriate support from external agencies when that is needed. Their work to provide early help to pupils who need it is particularly effective. The wider curriculum promotes pupils' understanding of risks and how to manage them. Pupils who spoke with inspectors were particularly knowledgeable about how to stay safe online.

Staff and parents are rightly confident that pupils are well cared for at school. All pupils who spoke with inspectors indicated that they feel safe at school, and that instances of bullying are rare and dealt with effectively. The school's records confirm this. Very many pupils benefit from the help provided by 'peer mentors'. These professionally trained pupils listen to individuals who are experiencing academic or personal difficulties, offer advice and work with staff to ensure they get the necessary help. This helps to create a community in which all are known and valued – and one in which pupils readily choose to support one another. Pupils also appreciate the steps the school takes to help those with mental health issues, such as providing access to counselling or assistance from external agencies.

Inspection findings

- The inspection team's first line of enquiry was to establish how far leaders have reduced pupil absence. In recent years, overall absence has been slightly above the national average, and disadvantaged pupils' rates of persistent absence have been above the national average for this group of pupils.
- Effective work with pupils and parents is helping to remove the barriers that have prevented some pupils from attending school regularly. Your recent changes to the way in which absence is tackled are ensuring that individuals' poor attendance is tackled quickly before it becomes entrenched. Since the beginning of the academic year, overall attendance has increased and is above the national average. However, disadvantaged pupils' attendance remains too low because a small number of pupils do not attend school regularly enough.
- We also agreed to establish how far leaders have ensured that disadvantaged pupils make good progress from their starting points. In 2017, overall, disadvantaged pupils had made too little progress by the end of key stage 4 and achieved less well in their academic qualifications than they should have done.
- Your monitoring indicates that typically, disadvantaged pupils currently on roll are making as much progress as other pupils with the same starting points. The work in pupils' books is consistent with this, and disadvantaged pupils told inspectors that they are well supported. In large part, this is because staff know individual pupils well, identify the barriers that might hold back their learning and work effectively to remove them. However, a small number of disadvantaged pupils are not doing as well as they might because they do not attend school as often as they should.

- In 2017, overall, attainment was low in science at GCSE and some pupils did not make as much progress as they might have done in mathematics – a subject area in which pupils have typically performed well in previous years. We agreed to establish how well current pupils are doing at key stages 3 and 4 in each subject. Work in pupils' science books indicates that pupils are making good progress, and that the less able are being particularly well supported. During lessons, it was evident that pupils have developed an understanding of the nature and purpose of scientific enquiry; they can formulate a hypothesis, test it via experimentation and consider carefully the implications of the results.
- Our scrutiny of pupils' work in mathematics, together with the school's monitoring information, indicates that most are progressing well. Teachers break down complex tasks so that pupils can solve problems sequentially. They are also alert to pupils' misconceptions, and are careful to unravel these. This means that when pupils move on, they have usually mastered techniques which they return to later on with confidence. Teachers' greater focus upon developing pupils' mathematical reasoning and ability to apply what they know to real-world problems is evident in pupils' work. This is helping pupils to respond appropriately when the wording of examination-style questions is unfamiliar to them, and is therefore helping them to be better able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.
- We also agreed to investigate how far teachers ensure that work provides an appropriate challenge for all, particularly the most able. This was an area for improvement identified at the time of the last inspection. The most able pupils made good progress in most key subjects at GCSE in 2016 and 2017. Typically, the most able pupils who join the school's sixth form make strong progress in their academic qualifications and achieve well. These pupils told inspectors that the work they complete in most subjects is sufficiently challenging, aside from in religious education and technology subjects, which they find too easy. Visits to lessons and scrutiny of the most able pupils' work confirmed these judgements.
- Within a number of subject areas, teachers make additional provision for the most able, which helps prepare them for success both at GCSE and in the sixth form. In history, for example, pupils aiming for the highest GCSE grades receive additional tuition. The subject leader for art described this additional provision as a process of 'constant refinement'. The results are evident to any visitor, in the form of the exceptionally high-quality artwork adorning the walls throughout the school site.
- The most able pupils told inspectors that they learn best when teachers encourage them to think deeply. Inspectors saw evidence, in lessons and in pupils' work, that many teachers challenge all pupils to think logically, to support their arguments with evidence, and to consider the merits of alternative perspectives.
- Often pupils of all abilities are encouraged to be sensitive to the nuances of language. During an English lesson, for example, pupils used their skills of textual analysis to debate how far the 'possessive love' depicted in two separate poems was similar in nature. In history work, pupils develop the ability to evaluate evidence carefully in order to determine the most important causes or

consequences of events. They use academic language appropriately and structure their responses so that their arguments are conveyed clearly and cogently.

- Although the most able are typically well catered for, some teachers do not do enough to challenge other pupils. At times, discussion or questioning during lessons involves only a small number of individuals, and teachers do not check the understanding of others carefully enough. This limits their ability to plan sequences of learning that facilitate pupils' accelerated progress.
- Sometimes, teachers pose interesting questions that might promote high-level thinking, but then proceed to develop the explanations or answers themselves, or move things on just as the discussion is becoming productive. This prevents pupils from developing and testing their own ideas. In some subjects, pupils too often complete work that is too easy for them, and so make less progress than they should.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they accelerate their work to improve disadvantaged pupils' attendance
- the most effective teaching techniques are shared widely, so that teachers enable pupils of all abilities to complete work that is appropriately challenging.

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

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- Inspectors held discussions with you about the key lines of enquiry for this inspection, leaders' evaluation of the quality of education, plans for future improvement and information about current pupils' and students' learning.
- Inspectors met with other leaders, teachers and members of support staff, the school's local authority improvement partner and the chair of governors, together with four other governors.
- Documents were examined, such as: the school's improvement plan; leaders' monitoring and analysis of the progress pupils and students make; records of their attendance and behaviour; pupil premium reports; and the school's safeguarding arrangements, records and files.

- Inspectors observed pupils' and students' learning, and looked at examples of their work, in a wide variety of subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with two groups of pupils, and with others informally during lessons, regarding their learning.
- The views of 79 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and those of the 36 staff who completed Ofsted's staff questionnaire were also taken into account.