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Gwynn Bassan
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Dear Gwynn Bassan

Short inspection of Holcombe Grammar School

Following my visit to the school on 24 April 2018 with Steve Baker, 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 October 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment as executive principal, you have worked determinedly with the two vice-principals to raise attainment, improve teaching and give a much greater focus to the quality of pupils' learning and thinking. Governors, middle leaders, staff and pupils share your vision for the school as well as your commitment, dedication and work ethic.

Leaders and governors have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the quality of educational provision in the school. Your vision to develop pupils' thinking skills is having a positive impact on the quality of learning and teaching. The majority of lessons observed were engaging and challenging, with feedback which enabled pupils to improve as well as develop their confidence, resilience and the desire to keep on learning.

More recently, you have focused on developing and empowering middle leaders so that they might be more active in taking responsibility for teaching and outcomes in their own areas. Middle leaders welcome their greater involvement in the decision-making and quality assurance of the school. I had the privilege of talking to a group of middle leaders, and they were confident and articulate about their roles and responsibilities, especially in terms of developing teaching and improving outcomes.

Pupils' progress and attainment continue to be well above national averages, but the progress of disadvantaged pupils is below that of their peers although now in line with national averages. Leaders are aware that high prior attainers are not making as much progress as middle prior attainers, so they have focused on

ensuring greater challenge in all lessons. Attainment and progress in the sixth form are similar to local and national averages, although the trend over time is one of improvement.

Your well-targeted and personally tailored professional development programme is having a positive impact on improving classroom practice and raising expectations. Inspectors identified particularly strong learning and progress in the core subjects. Leaders acknowledge that learning and progress in humanities are less secure. Learning walks confirmed teachers' strong subject knowledge and examination awareness, as well as their positive relationships and supportive interactions.

Your curriculum is appropriately adapted to the needs, abilities and interests of all pupils. A range of extra-curricular activities further promotes personal development and welfare. Form time and school assemblies are used to promote actively inclusive values such as democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law and an acceptance of those of different faiths and beliefs. The sixth-form curriculum provides an appropriate range of courses which is responsive to pupils' aptitudes and future needs, as evidenced through the high staying-on rates.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and meet statutory requirements. The trust's safeguarding policy is very comprehensive and the single central record fully compliant and easy to follow. The staff training programme has ensured that all staff are familiar with child protection practices. Reporting procedures are well known, with regular safeguarding updates and frequent reminders to staff, pupils, parents and carers. Senior leaders and governors have received safer recruitment training, which informs the recruitment and selection of all new staff. Governors are knowledgeable about safeguarding requirements and engaged in ensuring that these are actively implemented.

The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is a priority. Pupils say that they feel safe and secure in the school. They are aware of different forms of bullying, including homophobic and racist bullying, and say that bullying is always challenged and dealt with firmly. Pupils spoke positively about the advice and support provided about online safety and the opportunities to talk about any worries or concerns. The large majority of parents who completed the online questionnaire Parent View agreed that their child was happy and well looked after. Most parents agreed that their child felt safe.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, three lines of enquiry were agreed with the executive principal and senior leaders at the school. The first line of enquiry asked whether outcomes were high enough for all pupils in all subjects across all phases. School documentation confirms that raising outcomes of all pupils has been an ongoing priority for the school. Leaders have been working particularly hard to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils and high prior

attainers, as well as outcomes in humanities and the sixth form.

- In the classroom, teachers are much more focused on disadvantaged pupils and higher-attaining pupils. Lessons observed confirmed that these pupils are known by the teacher and that their specific needs are recognised and addressed. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils have risen dramatically, so that their progress is now similar to national averages. Outcomes for higher-attaining pupils are also improving as a result of the greater challenge offered and teachers' focus on developing pupils' thinking skills.
- Progress in the sixth form continues to rise, as a result of better teaching and strong leadership. Staying-on rates from Year 11 are particularly high, although approximately one quarter of the pupils join the sixth form from other schools. The school has worked hard to ensure that these pupils are better inducted into the sixth form. Similarly, more rigorous quality assurance has identified where teaching is weaker and provided support to ensure improvement. This is particularly true in German, economics, geography and media studies.
- The second line of enquiry concerned the quality and consistency of teaching, learning and assessment in meeting the needs of all pupils. Across the school, procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are regular and robust, with increased moderation opportunities to ensure consistency in expectations and judgements. Where teaching is identified as requiring improvement, tailored support is provided to secure a rapid and sustained improvement. Lesson observation data confirms that teaching is improving.
- The use of regular lesson observations, personalised professional development and ongoing support from other trust schools has contributed well to meeting the needs of all pupils in all subjects across all phases. Lessons observed confirm strong subject knowledge as well as high levels of teacher challenge and pupil engagement. The school's focus on developing pupils' literacy and thinking skills was especially evident, through the use of key words and a range of thinking strategies including circle maps and flow maps. In the humanities lessons observed and the work samples seen, this was much less evident.
- The third area of focus concerned the effectiveness of the leadership and governance of the school in addressing differences in outcomes, creating a culture of high expectations and developing an inspiring curriculum. Certainly, the recently appointed executive principal has a clear understanding of the school and its strengths and areas for improvement. He is ably supported by a hard-working senior leadership team and a knowledgeable governing board. In a relatively short time, leaders have improved teaching, raised expectations and ensured a greater focus on individual pupils through the use of data.
- Leaders have worked hard to develop the curriculum and ensure that schemes of work are challenging and developmental. Highlighting literacy and thinking skills has been appropriate in responding to pupils' relative weakness in communication, in order to develop resilience and determination in their learning. Leadership in the sixth form is particularly effective and, as a result, the quality of teaching is improving, as confirmed through lesson observations, work samples and collected data.

- Some parents do not appreciate the good work that is going on in the school. Approximately one third of the parents responding to Ofsted's online survey Parent View do not feel that the school provides valuable information about their child's progress. A similar proportion does not feel that the school responds well to concerns raised, and many additional comments suggested that concerns raised were not always responded to in a timely manner. The website, while meeting statutory requirements, is not up to date and many of the policies, for example the teaching and learning policy dated June 2011, require updating to reflect current practice.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- outcomes for pupils who are disadvantaged improve to match those of their peers with similar starting points
- humanities teaching routinely challenges all pupils to make substantial and sustained gains in their learning and progress
- further work is undertaken to ensure that communication with parents is improved and the website updated to reflect and celebrate current practice.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees (academies) and the chief executive officer of the multi academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Medway. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Metcalf

Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors undertook a series of accompanied learning walks, visiting 18 lessons, and looked at pupils' work as well as speaking with pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The inspection team looked at a wide range of school documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, development plans, assessment data and documents relating to safeguarding. The lead inspector spoke with governors and met with a group of middle leaders. The inspection took account of 93 responses to Ofsted's online survey Parent View, as well as the accompanying written responses. Unfortunately, due to an administrative error on the part of the school, the staff and pupil surveys were not completed.