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Mr Jason Davis
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Dear Mr Davis

Short inspection of Sturminster Newton High School

Following my visit to the school on 13 June 2018 with Mark Lees, 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 2015.

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

Your leadership is successfully combining the school's long-standing caring and compassionate ethos with a greater focus on ensuring that pupils achieve all that they are capable of. When you took up the headship in September 2015, you recognised that standards in the summer examinations were not good enough. You and your team have worked hard since then to improve them. Progress initially was slow. You had to address weaknesses in teaching and the curriculum. GCSE outcomes in 2017 remained below those of other schools, particularly in English and science. However, there are now clear signs that pupils currently in school are reaching higher standards.

Governors and senior leaders are self-critical and have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Plans to improve the school are well targeted and appropriate. You have made good use of support from the local authority and experienced headteachers in other schools to enhance your capacity.

The last inspection report asked leaders to strengthen middle leadership. Improving the quality of leadership has been a central feature of your school improvement strategy. Middle and senior leaders now feel accountable for the quality of their work and the impact that it has on improving outcomes for pupils. Middle leaders meet with you or your senior colleagues very regularly to discuss pupils' progress and the quality of teaching. There is an emphasis on checking the quality of teaching through visiting lessons and checking pupils' books. Middle leaders then discuss the progress that pupils are making with their subject teams. They intervene

effectively when progress is not good enough and they coach and support their colleagues in order to address any weaknesses.

You are restructuring the middle leadership team and have appointed new middle leaders to the three core areas of English, mathematics and science. This has increased the momentum for improvement markedly. The core subject leaders are working together well. They understand what they need to do to raise standards and they have set about their task with real enthusiasm. As a result of this work, pupils are now making better progress than they have in previous years. You are aware, however, that there is more to do to ensure that all pupils achieve as well as they should.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that the school has a strong culture of safeguarding. Staff are well trained and understand what they must do if they become aware of any potential safeguarding concerns. There is an experienced team to oversee the school's support for pupils who need help because they are vulnerable or at risk. This team ensures that staff are well briefed about any pupils who may need support when they join Year 7 from their primary schools. There are good relationships with local authority services to help protect those pupils who have challenges in their home lives. Teachers remind pupils regularly about potential risks to their safety, including online.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The school's record-keeping systems are good. All the appropriate checks are made before staff are appointed. Governors check these systems regularly to reassure themselves that they are compliant.

Inspection findings

This short inspection focused on leaders' work to raise standards for all pupils, on the performance of disadvantaged pupils, on standards for the most able and on the quality of the curriculum.

- Senior and middle leaders are focusing on two aspects to raise the quality of teaching that pupils experience. First is a school-wide drive to ensure that pupils understand how to improve their work. Teachers are expected to provide feedback to pupils on their work. Pupils are then given time to read and respond to their teachers' comments. Most pupils, but not all, do so. Where teachers and pupils work together in this way, the quality of pupils' work improves over time. Sometimes, however, the feedback is ineffective because it is not sufficiently precise and so pupils do not understand how to improve their work. Teachers have been developing the effectiveness of their feedback this year and there has been a steady improvement in its quality. Leaders are aware, however, that there is more to do to ensure that all feedback is as good as the best.
- Secondly, leaders and teachers are raising their expectations of what pupils can achieve. In the past, too often teachers allowed pupils to settle for second best.

Teachers are now asking more of their classes. They ask searching questions and expect pupils to think more deeply about their answers. This is beginning to have an impact. However, leaders acknowledge that there is a way to go yet before these higher expectations are embedded across the school.

- In the past, disadvantaged pupils have underachieved. Leaders are now using the pupil premium grant to support disadvantaged pupils effectively. There is a good plan in place that addresses most of this group's barriers to learning. The performance of individual pupils is tracked and interventions put in place to support them where necessary. As a result of this work, disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress. The biggest remaining barrier for the group is their poor attendance. Leaders and teachers are working hard to address this problem but at the moment too many disadvantaged pupils are absent too often and so miss work and fall behind.
- Leaders recognise that in previous years the most able did not reach the standards they are capable of. This year, a middle leader has been given the responsibility to lead teachers in tackling this matter. She has a good understanding of the issue and is providing support to teachers to help ensure that this group of pupils are suitably stretched. As a result, there have been some improvements this year. There are some areas where the most able are stimulated and make good progress. In mathematics, for example, pupils are routinely challenged with complex problems. However, in many subjects, the most able are only given work that challenges them when they have completed the tasks that other pupils do. This is slowing their progress.
- You realise that the school had been slow to respond to the demands of government reforms. This meant that for two years the published progress scores for the school were lower than they would otherwise be. Since then, leaders have reviewed and revised the curriculum the school offers. There is a strong moral commitment to ensuring that all pupils receive a broad range of opportunities in key stage 3. This includes a strong commitment to the arts and foreign languages. This year leaders have insisted that almost all pupils take a foreign language in key stage 4. The school's approach is ensuring that there is a rigorous and appropriate academic curriculum for all pupils that will help to prepare them for the next stage in their education.
- At the moment, the post-16 provision on the school site is managed by another local school. From September, leaders will run their own sixth form. This will provide them with an opportunity to ensure that the curriculum is appropriate and seamless from Year 7 through to Year 13.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they embed the recent improvements to teaching, learning and assessment, so that all pupils benefit from consistently high expectations across the curriculum and clear guidance in all subjects on how to improve their work
- the most able pupils benefit from teaching that consistently stretches them and

makes them think, so that they can attain the highest standards

- they continue to address poor attendance, particularly of disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Lovett
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors met with you, senior leaders, governors, staff and pupils. We also met with two senior leaders from other local schools that are working with you to support improvement. We visited lessons with leaders to observe learning and we looked at the quality of work in pupils' books. We considered documentary evidence relating to the impact of the school's work, including safeguarding, attendance and the use of the pupil premium funding. We took into account 57 responses to the Ofsted online survey, Parent View.