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Dear Mr Owen

Short inspection of The Maplesden Noakes School

Following my visit to the school on 14 November 2018 with Alan Powell and Patricia Slonecki, 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 September 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, together with your senior and middle leaders, have shaped a school in which pupils are happy and keen to learn. You are passionate in your pursuit of high standards in all aspects of school life. There is a strong culture of nurturing, mutual respect and support, as well as high expectations. The continued success of the school is based on your knowledge of your pupils, an unwavering determination to help them achieve well, and hardworking, dedicated staff. Staff are fully supportive of the direction you set for your school, and they feel proud to work at The Maplesden Noakes School.

Pupils learn in a calm, friendly atmosphere. During inspectors' visits to classrooms, the atmosphere was purposeful, and pupils were appropriately engaged in a range of learning activities. Inspectors found orderly conduct around the school, and pupils were polite and friendly. Relationships between staff and pupils and between pupils themselves appeared strong. The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire would recommend the school to others.

You have taken effective action to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. These were to raise further the quality of teaching and to improve standards of literacy. Leaders have strengthened the support for pupils who arrive from primary school with reading levels below age-related expectations. Your

approach has helped these pupils rapidly raise their reading ages, making effective use of the Year 7 literacy catch-up premium.

You have set about strengthening teaching, and staff have benefited from the professional development that they have received. When observing teaching, leaders identify strengths and areas for development accurately and use this to devise appropriate training. Teachers use assessment effectively in order to check what pupils know and understand and to provide feedback to help pupils improve their work in accordance with leaders' expectations. There is further scope to deepen pupils' knowledge and understanding through the use of more probing questioning and challenge. Leaders acknowledge that the most able pupils make weaker progress than other groups of pupils, and this remains a priority for improvement.

Your development of leadership within the school has energised dynamic middle leaders, who are driving further changes at the school. Leaders have identified that the two-year key stage 3 curriculum, which emphasises the development of skills, does not prepare pupils fully for the rigours of key stage 4 GCSE courses. Rightly, a review of the key stage 3 curriculum is under way.

Published GCSE examination results for 2016 and 2017 and provisional results for 2018 show some fluctuations from year to year, but the overall progress scores remain at the national average. Leaders' actions have successfully improved the progress made by disadvantaged pupils by the end of Year 11 and throughout key stage 4. You respond quickly when achievement within subjects declines and swiftly improve the quality of leadership and teaching where necessary.

The sixth form is a strength of the school. It is led strongly and provides an inclusive environment where students can thrive and make strong progress from their starting points. The carefully designed curriculum includes a wide range of academic and vocational courses that are well matched to students' abilities and aptitudes. Well-designed work experience and a range of extra-curricular activities ensure that students are successfully prepared for their next steps.

Throughout the school, a well-developed careers programme is raising aspirations and preparing pupils well for their next steps in education or employment.

Governors are highly committed to the school and proud of the strong sense of community which permeates the school. They invest time in listening to parents and pupils. They draw on their wider business experience to emphasise the need for employability skills. Governors challenge and support you and other leaders, but do not have the educational expertise to hold leaders to account precisely enough. As a stand-alone academy, the school is subject to very little external challenge and validation. In addition, leaders do not consistently evaluate the impact of actions taken on the progress of pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that staff receive regular training and that designated leaders hold relevant qualifications. Parents, staff and pupils are united in their view that pupils are safe in school. There are well-planned opportunities for pupils to learn to keep themselves safe, including e-safety. Due to strong relationships, teachers know pupils well, understand their needs and are alert to any changes. Staff take an active approach to safeguarding, following up concerns swiftly.

However, leaders have been slow to publish an updated safeguarding policy in line with the most recent statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE). This needs to be addressed urgently so that all members of the school community can access the school's policy, which should fully incorporate the recent guidance.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, inspectors checked on leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness and the steps being taken to improve teaching and learning, pupils' outcomes, and the effectiveness of the curriculum in each key stage. Inspectors also considered leaders' responses to the recommendations made in the previous inspection report.
- Year 7 pupils who join the school with reading levels below those expected for their age make good progress due to the effective teaching of a systematic reading programme.
- Published performance information for the end of key stage 4 in 2016 and 2017 and provisional results for 2018 show that pupils' progress scores are consistently in line with the national average. Provisional results for 2018 show that the overall progress score and the progress score for disadvantaged pupils are higher than they were in 2017. Progress scores for pupils with high prior attainment remain lower than those of pupils with middle or low prior attainment. Provisional results show that the proportions of pupils attaining at least a grade 4 and grade 5 in both English and mathematics are lower than in 2017. Leaders attribute this to staffing difficulties in English last year, which have now been resolved.
- The school's performance information shows that disadvantaged pupils make similar progress to non-disadvantaged pupils through Years 9 and 10. Intense intervention, particularly during Year 11, has helped to improve the GCSE outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Throughout the school, a range of strategies are in place to help improve disadvantaged pupils' well-being and achievement. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent from school has reduced, but remains too high. Evidently, a range of strategies are in place to support disadvantaged pupils, but leaders do not thoroughly analyse their impact to show the effect of the school's use of pupil premium funding. The details in your pupil premium statement on the school's website fall short of the DfE's recommendations for academies.
- During inspectors' visits to lessons, teachers showed strong subject knowledge, and pupils and students completed tasks willingly. There is a consistency of

approach during lessons which helps pupils learn well. Feedback by teachers in pupils' books is detailed and follows the school policy consistently. Mostly, teaching takes close account of pupils' starting points and uses effective strategies to meet their needs. However, sometimes the most able are not fully challenged, and questioning does not probe their learning deeply. This hinders them in making the progress of which they are capable.

- Subject leaders have identified gaps in pupils' knowledge as they embark on their key stage 4 studies. Leaders acknowledge that the current key stage 3 curriculum is designed to develop skills and build resilience and needs to be strengthened to enable leaders to assess what pupils know and understand. Key stage 4 teaching can then build on pupils' starting points more accurately.
- Sixth-form students achieve well in a wide range of vocational and academic subjects. Their individual study programmes are enhanced by well-regarded work experience, rich extra-curricular activities and comprehensive careers advice. Levels of student retention from Year 12 to Year 13 are very high, and destination data shows that virtually all go on to further and higher education, employment or apprenticeships.
- Leaders, including governors, are well aware of the strengths of the school and, broadly, of those aspects which could be even better. However, leaders' evaluation of provision at the school does not carefully analyse the impact of actions taken on pupils' achievement throughout the school. In the absence of robust external review and challenge, leaders' judgements about the effectiveness of the school against the Ofsted inspection criteria are too high.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the review of the key stage 3 curriculum plans to build and sequence pupils' knowledge and skills across a broad curriculum
- teaching consistently challenges pupils and makes them think hard so that all groups of pupils make good progress
- leaders sharply evaluate the impact of actions on pupils' progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, your deputy headteacher and other senior and middle leaders. The lead inspector met two governors, including the chair of governors. Together with leaders, inspectors visited classes across the school. We considered 85 responses by staff to Ofsted's online survey. We took careful account of 149 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 145 free-text comments and one email. Inspectors spoke informally with pupils and reviewed 156 responses by pupils to Ofsted's online survey. We looked at documents relating to the school's work, including the school's self-evaluation, development plan, policies and safeguarding records.