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Mr Neil Hall
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Dear Mr Hall

Short inspection of Winchcombe School

Following my visit to the school on 4 December 2018 with Alun Williams, 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.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Winchcombe is a tight-knit and caring school community. During this inspection I was struck by how highly parents and pupils value their school and appreciate the ethos you and your staff have created. You make the most of being a small secondary school and knowing individual pupils very well. Several pupils mentioned the 'family feel' of Winchcombe and this was echoed by parents who responded to the Ofsted survey. Pupils' attitudes to learning are highly positive, they participate willingly and with interest in their lessons and generally behave very well.

Despite an environment that is so conducive to effective learning, progress is not strong enough across all groups of pupils, nor is it consistently strong in different subjects. Progress measures at the end of Year 11 in 2018 show a whole-school improvement on the previous year, but the overall result is broadly average, rather than good. The most able pupils make significantly less progress than their peers, and disadvantaged pupils lag too far behind other pupils, both in the school and nationally.

You are keenly aware of these disparities in pupils' achievement and you and your team are working hard to reverse inconsistencies. However, senior leaders do not apply a precise and sharp enough analysis of how well different pupils are learning

to drive the necessary improvements. Several initiatives are underway to tackle underachievement, such as the appointment of a 'more able' coordinator and training for teachers to sharpen their focus on high-ability pupils. However, pupils' books show a very variable picture of how well they are developing their knowledge and understanding. There is too little work in many books, notably in Year 7 science, or work that is patchy, or poorly organised. In contrast, some pupils' work is extensive, clear and coherent. Expectations and standards vary too much from class to class.

You and your senior team work hard to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning at Winchcombe. However, your approach lacks coherence and clarity. The achievement of some pupils is not shifting with sufficient urgency because there is no common understanding of what will make the difference, set out by the senior team, then non-negotiable for everyone else. Target-setting varies according to a department's previous performance, rather than deriving from pupils' starting points. Governors want all Winchcombe pupils to aspire to at least good progress, but the school improvement plan does not aim high enough to achieve this. Governors are providing effective challenge. They have commissioned an external analysis of the school's performance because they want a view that is 'focused, robust and objective' to inform their actions.

When your school was last inspected, mathematics was identified as a key area for improvement. You can point to significant impact here. Pupils now achieve as well in mathematics as in English, where they previously lagged behind. Another area of success has been in your drive to improve attendance. Attendance dipped well below average in 2017; too many pupils were persistently absent from school, especially disadvantaged pupils. As a result of your actions, attendance is currently higher than average.

Aspects of learning beyond the classroom are also improving. There is greatly enhanced careers advice and guidance, with more frequent opportunities for pupils to find out about higher education and to widen their horizons. You take destinations beyond Winchcombe seriously and measure carefully how many pupils secure a place in further education, training and employment. This is a strongly improving picture.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are effusive about the culture of care and protection in their small school. Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and supported by effective systems for reporting any concerns about a child's safety or well-being. There is a strong culture of vigilance. Staff are well informed about potential risks to young people and know where and how to access support. Senior leaders work closely with outside agencies to ensure that children and families get the help they need quickly.

Pupils speak with pride about their involvement in 'WAM', a local initiative that mentors young people, challenges discrimination and insists that, 'We All Matter'.

They also value very highly their ability to use the online tool that enables anonymous reporting of concerns like bullying. The student parliament has been instrumental in raising awareness of mental health issues. A focus day was warmly welcomed by pupils, staff and parents; follow-up is planned.

Inspection findings

- During this short inspection, we agreed to focus on a small number of specific areas of the school's work. These included: the achievement of groups of pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils and the most able; attendance; how well the planned curriculum supports good progress; and how you have tackled underachievement in mathematics.
- Senior leaders are very aware of the variability in pupils' achievement and they work hard to bring about improvement. However, their analysis of pupils' progress is not precise and rigorous enough. Consequently, there is no clear strategy for raising standards that is understood by everyone and that influences classroom practice. This blurs accountability.
- Teachers do not insist on the same standard of work from all pupils or in all classes. There are common approaches to assessment but they are variably applied. Work is detailed and meticulous in some books, scruffy and sporadic in others. Questioning is sometimes carefully targeted to elicit a thoughtful answer, sometimes openly pitched, with pupils calling out randomly.
- You offer a broad curriculum and give pupils a balance of free choice and guidance in their subject choices. Senior leaders report that guidance is improving, with fewer pupils on courses that do not challenge or interest them. The oversight of curriculum planning and implementation is improving, but the impact cannot yet be seen in universally good progress.
- Plans are in place for the delivery of subject content but not all subject leaders are clear about how to ensure progression through the curriculum. An exception to this is in English, where the concept of structure was introduced earlier to enable younger pupils to understand the writer's craft. Adaptations like this in English have had a direct and positive impact on pupils' knowledge, understanding and, consequently, their grades.
- You attribute your success in mathematics to continuity of teaching and strengthened leadership. This is visible in some challenging teaching and in how teachers target their questions to check pupils' understanding and probe their thinking. The strongest teaching is clearly raising standards, but mathematics also suffers from too much variability in progress across different classes and in the quality of work in books.
- Senior leaders have a determined and relentless approach to making sure pupils attend school regularly. This means working closely with families, but also sometimes challenging parents in the best interests of their children's education. You are right to be proud of the upturn in attendance figures, but you are also aware that this is unfinished business. Attendance in Year 9 and for disadvantaged pupils remains too low.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they review the intent, implementation and impact of curriculum planning, so that all senior and middle leaders have a shared understanding of what good progress over time looks like and of how to plan for it
- their monitoring and analysis of pupils' progress across all subjects are more precise and rigorous, and used to pinpoint and tackle the underachievement of different groups of pupils
- expectations of what all pupils can achieve rise significantly and lead to more aspirational achievement targets for all
- their drive to raise attendance and reduce persistent absence continues at pace, especially for disadvantaged pupils and especially in Year 9.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held discussions with you, members of your senior team, subject leaders and with a range of other staff. We spoke both formally and informally with pupils throughout the school day and met with members of the governing body. We looked at information about pupils' achievement, school self-evaluation and improvement planning, and assessment records. We checked records of staff recruitment and scrutinised safeguarding arrangements. We visited a range of lessons, accompanied by you and your senior team, and reviewed the quality of work in pupils' books. We read parents' responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and spoke with a parent by telephone.