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Mrs Jill Davies
Principal
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Dear Mrs Davies

Short inspection of The Studio School Liverpool

Following my visit to the school on 4 December 2018 with Senior Her Majesty's Inspector Bev Barlow, 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.

Since taking up your appointment in September 2018, you have wasted no time in bringing about improvements in teaching and learning. You and your executive principal work very well as a team and have made some changes to senior and middle leadership which have improved accountability. You, together with your senior leaders, governors and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Northern Schools Trust (NST), have created an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated. Pupils achieve well across the school, including in a range of digital media and creative technology subjects. Many pupils go on to careers in these areas.

You and your staff team successfully support pupils who join the school in Year 10 from over 50 secondary schools and, as a result, they settle in quickly. Pupils who spoke with me said that they enjoy learning about coding and gaming. They said that the specialist facilities and strong links with industry were some of the reasons they chose to come to the school. They were very positive about the community atmosphere in the school. A typical comment was, 'It's more like a family than a school.' Pupils are proud of their school and wear their uniform smartly. They value the wide range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities, including e-sports, comic creation and robotics.

The overwhelming majority of parents and carers who made use of Ofsted's free-text service were very positive about the culture of care and support for pupils' personal and academic development. One parent commented, 'My child's mental health and confidence have improved.'

Since the last inspection, some GCSE and A-level classes are now being taught across both the studio school and Liverpool Life Sciences University Technology College (UTC), with whom you share the building. You have worked closely with the principal at the UTC to establish clear lines of responsibility for pupils' outcomes.

Leaders ensure that assessments of pupils are accurate through internal moderation and consultation with the UTC and with other schools within the NST. Staff feel valued and are proud to work at the school. They welcome the professional training that they receive.

At the previous inspection, senior leaders and governors were asked to strengthen leadership and management. You, together with the executive principal, have sharpened the school's self-evaluation and have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Your school development plan has measurable milestones and is evaluated accurately against criteria for success. Middle leaders are committed to improving pupils' outcomes. They now monitor and evaluate their subject areas more effectively than previously. A review of pupils' work showed that teachers follow the school's assessment policy.

At the last inspection, you were also asked to ensure that students achieve as well as they could in the sixth form by improving retention on some courses. The information you provided shows that students' progress and retention rates are improving, particularly for vocational subjects. However, further work is required to improve progress in some academic courses and build on the recent improvements in retention rates.

Another area for development was to ensure that the most able pupils are challenged to achieve their potential. You have introduced a range of strategies to address this. Information from tests is used as a baseline from which teachers plan schemes of work for pupils. Their good subject knowledge enables them to probe pupils' understanding and deepen their thinking. Inspection evidence indicates that most of the activities set by teachers are closely matched to the ability of pupils. The most able pupils are making stronger progress than in the past. However, there is still work to do to ensure that the most able pupils in all subjects are challenged further.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding at The Studio School Liverpool. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Safeguarding records are detailed. Leaders' records of checks on the suitability of staff to work with pupils and students are up to date. Staff are well trained, including in understanding the 'Prevent' duty. They are alert to the dangers of

extremism and radicalisation. Staff know what to do if they have any concern about a pupil's welfare. Leaders work closely with outside agencies to secure pupils' safety and act quickly to address any concerns.

Pupils said that they feel safe and are happy in the school. They reported that they know how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet and social media. They said that bullying incidents are rare. They know whom to go to should they have any concerns and they trust staff to respond effectively.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry, the first of which was the progress made by pupils in key stage 4. Using published information to measure progress from Year 7 to Year 11 would be misleading, since pupils start at the school in Year 10. Also, because of the school's specialist curriculum, some pupils do not study a sufficient number of GCSE subjects to make a full contribution to the school's overall progress measure. Consequently, published information about progress is misleading. A significant number of pupils join the school having not made sufficient progress in key stage 3. Also, many pupils arrive after disruption to their education. Leaders have developed an appropriate mix of vocational courses and GCSE subjects which meet the needs and interests of pupils. Pupils make good progress from their starting points across most subjects in key stage 4.
- You correctly identified the fact that pupils did not make enough progress in English in 2018. This was partly due to recent changes in leadership and staffing in this subject area. You have introduced a range of strategies to improve teaching and learning. The school timetable has been changed to allow pupils to have a daily diet of English and mathematics. Our observations of learning and scrutiny of pupils' work show that pupils are now making better progress from their starting points in English than in the past.
- As part of this inspection, we looked at the support given to disadvantaged pupils. Leaders use the pupil premium funding effectively to provide a range of interventions and in-class support for these pupils. Assessment information and a scrutiny of these pupils' work show that they are catching up with their peers and making good progress.
- The curriculum promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. Pupils understand how to keep themselves safe from potential risks, including those that can arise from knife crime, using drugs or belonging to a gang. Leaders and staff have a strong commitment to promoting equality and raising awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pupils' rights. Pupils have a strong understanding of British values.
- Leaders keep a close eye on pupils' attendance and quickly follow up any absences. They, together with the education welfare officer, work hard to develop positive relationships with families. Regular attendance is celebrated through rewards. Consequently, the rate of attendance of most pupils has improved and is closer to the national average. However, a very small minority of pupils do not attend school as often as they should. These pupils had poor levels

of attendance at their previous schools. Inspection evidence shows that, since joining this school, their attendance has improved significantly.

- The rate of fixed-term exclusions is falling significantly due to effective behaviour systems and good relationships between teachers and pupils. Rates of permanent exclusions are very low. In lessons, pupils are keen to learn and support each other well. They are respectful to each other and to staff. Pupils are calm and orderly as they move between lessons and during social times.
- As part of this inspection, we examined the reasons why a high number of pupils left the school in the past at times other than at the end of key stage 4. Leaders' systems ensure that all pupils leaving the school continue their education elsewhere. They evaluate the reasons why pupils leave. Many pupils went back to their original school or a different school because they did not like the school's specialist curriculum and high expectations. A very small number of pupils left to be educated at home.
- Students in the sixth form show a professional attitude to their work. They spoke warmly about the support that they receive. They can choose from a wide range of vocational and academic courses. Over time, they achieve well in vocational subjects such as creative media. In 2018, sixth-form students made below-average progress in some academic subjects. You are aware of the reasons for this and have strengthened staffing, monitoring and evaluation in the sixth form. Inspection evidence shows that students' progress is now improving in academic subjects. However, you are aware that there is more to do to ensure that students make consistently good progress in these subjects. In the past, retention rates on some courses have been low. However, as a result of better transition arrangements, they are improving. You are in the process of reviewing the sixth-form curriculum to ensure that more students who start their courses complete them successfully.
- Pupils and students have access to effective careers information and guidance. Leaders ensure that they have the opportunity to undertake suitable work experience. This contributes to the high proportion going on to places in education, training or employment which closely match their career aspirations. For example, in 2018, five students secured places at a university to study for a degree in games design and production.
- The CEO of the NST has supported you and the executive principal very effectively in improving the quality of education in the school. Governors are passionate about the school and know it well. They have a wide range of experience and skills which they use to challenge and support leaders effectively.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most able pupils are challenged so that they reach the highest standards of which they are capable

- they build on current initiatives to review the sixth-form curriculum to improve retention rates on some courses
- students following academic courses in the sixth form make consistently good progress from their starting points.

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

Yours sincerely

Ahmed Marikar
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection, inspectors met with you, other senior leaders, middle leaders, teaching staff and a specialist leader of education from the NST. I met with members of the local governing body, including the chair and the CEO of the NST. Inspectors visited classrooms – jointly with you and your leaders – to observe pupils' learning and talk to them about it. Inspectors met with a group of pupils from across the school. They scrutinised pupils' work to evaluate their learning over time.

Inspectors took account of 11 responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire, including 11 free-text responses. They also considered the views of 18 staff.

Inspectors looked at a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the development plan and information about pupils' progress. They also evaluated safeguarding procedures, including policies to keep children safe, records of training, safeguarding checks and attendance and behaviour information. I also undertook a review of the school's website.