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Ms Julie O'Connor
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Dear Ms O'Connor

Short inspection of Dowdales School

Following my visit to the school on 15 November 2018 with Tanya Sheaff, 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 November 2013.

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.**

You and other school leaders clearly promote a culture where 'students come first'. This philosophy underpins all that is planned at the school. We saw that pupils are known well and valued as individuals by staff. This is a school where equality and inclusivity are deep rooted.

As a result, pupils with whom we spoke were positive about many aspects of school life. This includes systems that recognise and reward their good work and attendance and a popular and inclusive extra-curricular programme. We were impressed by pupils' courtesy, confidence and articulacy. They typically enjoy positive relationships with one another and adults. They care about themselves, others and the wider world. For example, almost every pupil at the school participated in creating an impressive poppy display to mark Remembrance Day at the school recently. Pupils' overall attendance is broadly average, although the attendance of disadvantaged pupils does not match that of others nationally.

You and other senior leaders, including governors, have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. You pointed out that many pupils attain the grades of which they are capable by the time they take their examinations at the end of Year 11. These pupils make broadly average progress in their time at the school over a range of subjects, including English and mathematics. However, this is

not the case for some groups of pupils. Disadvantaged pupils and those who are the most able do not consistently make progress which matches that of others nationally.

Actions taken to improve pupils' examination results in mathematics since the last inspection have been effective. As a result, pupils' results in mathematics consistently match those of others nationally from similar starting points. The sustained improvement in mathematics demonstrates leaders' capacity to strengthen other aspects of pupils' education.

Senior leaders who joined inspectors when visiting lessons and looking at pupils' work demonstrated a secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses which were highlighted. Pupils' attitudes to learning are a strength of the school. Pupils typically try hard in class and present their work carefully. They are generally keen and confident to participate in learning. When given the opportunity to read, think deeply, and speak and write with precision and at length, such as in German, pupils learn well.

However, leaders recognise that the most able pupils are not consistently provided with opportunities to think or respond in enough depth and detail. This is especially the case in Year 7. Leaders have used their accurate analysis of the quality of teaching at the school to design a teacher-training programme which focuses on the current priorities for improvement, such as the variable progress of disadvantaged pupils.

You and other leaders are vigilant and effective in ensuring that pupils move on to education and/or training when they leave school. In fact, every pupil who left in the summer of 2018 progressed to such a course or employment. The most able pupils and those who are disadvantaged are currently the most likely not to move on to the next steps of which they are capable and you have actions in place to address this.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You are vigilant when ensuring that safeguarding records, including checks on employees' suitability to work with children, are complete.

Inspectors checked safeguarding referrals. We found that they are followed up and recorded effectively. Staff are routinely updated about safeguarding issues, including how to spot signs of drug misuse, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. You are responsive to the risks posed in the local area and beyond. This supports the effective culture of safeguarding.

The pupils with whom we spoke said that they feel safe at the school. They typically say that when they report any cases of bullying, they are dealt with. The older pupils with whom we spoke said that anti-bullying systems are effective, because they minimise and resolve issues over time. Staff teach pupils how to keep

themselves safe from potential dangers that can arise when using the internet. Inspectors checked that systems to support the safety and well-being of pupils who are absent from school are effective. Leaders manage effectively the safety of pupils who attend alternative provision.

Inspection findings

- The first area that we considered was whether school leaders manage the pupil premium funding effectively. Too many disadvantaged pupils have not attained the examination grades of which they are capable in recent years. Disadvantaged pupils have been more likely than others to miss lessons due to absence, including persistent absence. This has had a negative impact on their progress.
- You and other senior leaders, including governors, keep a sharp focus on improving disadvantaged pupils' progress. It is a key priority at the school. You monitor, evaluate and refine the actions that you and staff take to secure better outcomes for these pupils. Teachers' increased awareness of their responsibility to make sure that disadvantaged pupils make good progress has led to more effective learning than previously in some areas, such as the current Year 11. However, despite these improvements, disadvantaged pupils' progress varies within and across subjects and across year groups.
- You have a similarly clear focus on improving the regular attendance of disadvantaged pupils. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils at the school is below average, but the number of these pupils is increasing. Many more of them live further from the school than was the case previously. The actions that you have put in place to improve disadvantaged pupils' attendance reflect this changing context and are, in some cases, effective. However, you recognise that the overall attendance of disadvantaged pupils does not match that of others nationally and that too many disadvantaged pupils are persistently absent.
- Our second focus area was to establish whether leaders ensure pupils' good conduct, including for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). In previous years, the number of pupils excluded from the school was above the national average. Pupils with SEND had high exclusion rates.
- We found that, overall, the actions taken by senior leaders to encourage pupils' good conduct and attitudes to learning are effective. Generally, parents and carers, pupils and staff are positive about the standard of conduct at the school. This view matches inspectors' findings. We saw that your high expectations of pupils' behaviour have created a culture where good behaviour is the norm. This encourages pupils' positive attitudes to school and to their education. They are generally happy and confident in expressing themselves and being who they want to be. The number of exclusions is decreasing, because pupils are clear about what is expected of them.
- We focused on the support provided for pupils with SEND. We found that these pupils are known well by staff and supported effectively. Leaders adjust school systems and meet the needs of this group to support their good conduct. Staff are well trained to spot early signs of and prevent any worsening of negative behaviour. As a result, the number of exclusions of pupils with SEND has

decreased.

- The third area that we looked at was how well pupils' progress in mathematics has improved since the last inspection. We found that the actions you and other school leaders have taken since the last inspection have brought about the improvements required. Mathematics is now effectively led and taught. Overall, pupils' examination results match those of others nationally. The pupils with whom we spoke were generally complimentary about the quality of teaching in mathematics. Indeed, many of them cited mathematics as one of their favourite subjects.
- The final aspect that we considered was whether pupils with high starting points consistently make the progress of which they are capable. This area was highlighted in the last inspection as one where leaders could improve the standard of education provided at the school. You and other leaders have taken actions to secure better outcomes for these pupils. This has had a positive impact, but there is still more work to do to embed the consistency required.
- We found that where teachers provide the most able pupils with opportunities to explore complex issues, to think deeply and to express their findings and views with precision and fluency, they attain the highest levels. We saw examples from pupils' work, especially in key stage 4, where teachers were supporting and inspiring pupils to make strong progress. However, this is not routinely the case. They do not consistently set these pupils work which stretches their learning. As a result, the most able pupils make uneven progress within and between subjects across the school.
- This inconsistency is most notable in Year 7, where too many teachers do not use the results of tests taken at the end of primary school effectively. The work that they set does not take enough account of what pupils already know, understand and can do. This is especially the case for pupils who enter the school with high starting points. In some cases, these pupils needlessly repeat work which they have already completed successfully in primary schools. At other times, the work that they are set is too easy for them, so the most able pupils do not attain the higher levels of which they are capable.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the attendance and progress of disadvantaged pupils continue to improve, so that they match those of other pupils nationally
- teachers use assessment information effectively to plan work that stretches and challenges the most able pupils, especially those in Year 7.

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

Yours sincerely

Stephen Ruddy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Meetings were held with you, other school leaders and governors. We also spoke with a representative of the local authority. Inspectors spoke with pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views on a variety of issues, including safeguarding, teaching and behaviour. We examined a range of the school's documentation such as the self-evaluation, the improvement plan, assessment information, attendance and behaviour records, the pupil premium funding plans and safeguarding information. We considered 73 responses to the Ofsted online parents' questionnaire, Parent View, and 46 written responses from parents to Ofsted's free-text facility. We took account of 170 responses to the survey of pupils and 76 responses to the staff survey. We conducted learning walks across a range of subjects and year groups. We scrutinised the work in a sample of pupils' books by undertaking a work analysis with school leaders.