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Mrs Lisa Howell
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Howell

Short inspection of Downend School

Following my visit to the school on 9 January 2019 with Ofsted Inspectors Will Morgan and Mark Thompson, 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 2014.

This school continues to be good.

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

There have been a significant number of changes since the previous inspection, including your appointment as headteacher in September 2017. You, supported by trust leaders, trustees and local governors, have strengthened the leadership capacity of the school. You have clearly defined the responsibilities of each member of the leadership team. Governors hold leaders to account tightly.

The school provides a calm and orderly environment. Standards of behaviour have improved significantly, as seen in the substantial reduction in the number of exclusions. Inspectors found pupils to be polite and to have positive attitudes towards their learning.

The number on roll has increased in recent years, with the school consistently being oversubscribed in Year 7. The amalgamation of the sixth form with Mangotsfield School has ensured the long-term viability of the sixth form, which is now solely located at Downend School.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that pupils are sufficiently challenged. Although you have made some improvements, you are aware that there is more work to do. Teaching staff are now keenly aware of the needs of pupils and are making better use of information about

what pupils know, understand and can do when planning learning.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, particularly those with specific responsibility for safeguarding, are tenacious in keeping children safe and ensuring that pupils know how to keep themselves safe. A strong culture of safeguarding has been created. Staff apply their training about a wide range of risks locally and online. Leaders regularly update staff on the particular risks that are more prevalent locally. This ensures that all staff remain vigilant to the signs and symptoms of harm.

Leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The checks required to be undertaken prior to making staff appointments are carried out, and induction training is in place. This ensures that new colleagues quickly understand the importance of this aspect of their role.

Governors and trust staff provide additional support to ensure that the arrangements for safeguarding continue to be strong.

Inspection findings

- The first area of the school's work we reviewed was the impact of pupil premium funding in ensuring that disadvantaged pupils make strong progress. This has been an area that staff have been working on for several years. The standards achieved by these pupils have been below those of their classmates and other pupils nationally for the last three years.
- You have appointed a senior leader to oversee the school's approach to improving outcomes for this group of pupils. He has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach. All staff are aware of the importance of raising standards. Your leadership team is clear about the main barriers to disadvantaged pupils making the progress they should. Teaching staff are aware of the pupils in their classes who are entitled to pupil premium funding and actively engage them in learning. They provide additional support to help pupils overcome the barriers they face in their learning, particularly concerning pupils' lower literacy skills. Staff are available to help pupils with their homework. Disadvantaged pupils and their families benefit from additional advice when making course choices for key stage 4 and when considering their options at the end of Year 11.
- You have asked staff to tackle the low attendance of disadvantaged pupils. The school's attendance officer is closely monitoring the attendance of this group of pupils and works with the pupils and their families to reduce absence levels. However, these efforts have had limited impact.
- The school has a small number of children who are looked after. Suitable personal education plans are in place for these pupils.
- Over the last three years, the achievement of disadvantaged pupils by the end of Year 11 has improved from a very low base. In 2016, disadvantaged pupils achieved, on average, almost two grades lower than other pupils. The difference

reduced in 2017, although the progress made by this group was still in the lowest 20% of schools in the country. In 2018, the picture improved further.

- The second aspect of the school's work that inspectors reviewed concerned the progress of the most able pupils, including those in the sixth form. In both 2017 and 2018, this group of pupils did not achieve as well as their counterparts in other schools at the end of key stage 4. A similar difference was seen in the outcomes for students in the sixth form in 2017. However, this has returned to a stronger position in the most recent set of results for Year 13 students.
- Your team is acutely aware of the need to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning challenges the most able pupils fully. You have strived to achieve better outcomes but recognise that there is still considerable work to be done. Inspectors found pupils' attitudes to learning to be very positive and, in many subjects, there are good examples of pupils being challenged. Pupils show a secure understanding of their learning verbally. However, their written work is not as sophisticated and so does not demonstrate their understanding to the same degree.
- The development of middle leaders is a trust-wide priority. Many training programmes have been provided within the trust and as part of the school's involvement with the North Avon Teaching School Alliance. These have enabled middle leaders to actively work with colleagues to ensure raised expectations. Middle leaders, often working with their counterparts in other trust schools, are redesigning key stage 3 curriculum plans so that they better challenge the most able.
- Inspectors saw some strong progress by pupils in subjects such as English, mathematics and music. However, this progress is not consistently evident across other subjects. Not all leaders are using available information effectively to identify pupils who should be working at the highest standards. This limits the progress of the most able pupils.
- Aspirations in the sixth form are not consistently high, although there are some indicators of improvement, with successful applications to some of the most prestigious universities this year. Governors acknowledge that standards are not as high as they should be. They comment that leaders have not provided them with the depth of analysis of progress in the sixth form in the past as they have done for the other year groups. This is being rectified this academic year.
- The standards achieved by boys by the end of key stage 4 have declined in recent years. Leaders have reviewed the quality of teaching of boys and identified some of the shortcomings. They are determined to improve boys' literacy and have raised staff awareness of strategies to improve this. This will be followed up by further training planned for February 2019.
- Leaders have initiated a curriculum review to ensure that there is a greater potential for boys to achieve more highly. The school is also working with a national network of schools to develop strategies to improve outcomes for boys and learn from others' successes. Consequently, leaders have reviewed the courses that are followed in some subjects, such as those offered in modern foreign languages and the 'open' element of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).

Leaders are also providing additional support for boys in Year 9 when they are making their key stage 4 course choices. Leaders have recently appointed a mentor to oversee boys' academic achievement. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this strategy.

- Across the school, boys' behaviour and attitudes, in class and around the school, are conducive to good learning. However, work in boys' books is often not as strong as that of girls. In a few subjects, particularly modern languages and subjects in the open element of the EBacc, boys' work is more often incomplete.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- more effective use is made of leaders' evaluations of strategies to inform future planning
- they improve outcomes for key stage 4 pupils, particularly boys, in languages and subjects that contribute to the open element of the EBacc
- the most able pupils, including those in the sixth form, are challenged fully so that they make stronger progress.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of Castle School Education Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for South Gloucestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Iain Freeland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, senior leaders joined inspectors observing learning in classes. Inspectors looked at the work of many pupils and students in the sixth form. Meetings were held with you, your senior leaders, the teacher responsible for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), a group of heads of department and a group of Year 10 boys. I met with the chair of the multi-academy trust board, four members of the local governance committee and the chief executive officer of the trust.

Inspectors observed pupils at break and lunchtimes. Inspectors spoke with pupils about their learning and their understanding of how to keep themselves safe.

Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's own

analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, assessment information and staff recruitment checks. They also analysed records related to pupils who are looked after and those with SEND.

I considered the views of 256 parents and carers who responded to Parent View, including 160 written comments. I also considered the views of 51 members of staff who completed Ofsted's staff questionnaire and the 107 pupils who completed the online pupil questionnaire.