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Mr Simon Dyson
Principal
Highfields Academy
Cumberland Avenue
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Dear Mr Dyson

Short inspection of Highfields Academy

Following my visit to the school on 17 April 2019, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in April 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Together with the vice-principal, senior leaders and the full support of governors and the Star Academy Trust, you have maintained and built upon the strengths of the predecessor school and addressed previous recommendations appropriately. Together with leaders, you have been particularly successful in helping pupils to improve the presentation of their work, which is to a very high standard, and improved the quality of teaching.

In recent years the school has transformed. The trust has made significant capital investment in the school, which has been rebuilt and refurbished to a very high standard. Outdoor provision has been improved, including for children in the early years.

Since the inception of the new school, you have worked closely with the trust and extended provision. For example, following the school's successful application to the Department for Education to extend the age range of children to include two-, three- and four-year-olds, you have provided good-quality, and very popular, pre-school services since October 2017.

Leaders and governors know the school exceptionally well. This is shown in comprehensive and analytical school development plans and accurate analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors and trust members have first-hand experience of the quality of teaching, learning and the curriculum. They come into school regularly to meet with teachers, pupils and leaders and receive detailed

reports from you and other leaders, including subject specialists.

Highfields Academy is a calm and purposeful school, where teachers and teaching assistants are proud of their large, well-resourced classrooms. Pupils take care of their physical surroundings and wear their uniforms proudly. You ensure that the school works in partnership with a range of schools, both within the Nantwich school partnership and further afield, to share good practice. You have lots of evidence to indicate that such partnerships help to improve the accuracy of the school's assessments of pupils' work, as well as the quality of teaching.

Most parents speak highly of the school. Typically, they comment that: 'It's a fantastic school which has a good mix of academic, sporting and cultural experiences on offer' and 'staff are very caring, and teaching is of a high standard'. Parents are of the view that their children are happy, safe and making good progress. They are very appreciative of the pastoral support available, not only for their children, but for the whole family. In addition, parents are very complimentary about the support available for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which they say is good.

You ensure that pupils benefit from an interesting curriculum, which secures their engagement and good progress. Various educational trips and visits provide highly memorable experiences which teachers use well to stimulate pupils' writing. Your forest school programme supports the development of pupils' team-working and problem-solving skills and enhances their resilience. Highfields is well known for its sporting excellence, as shown in pupils' individual and team successes in local and regional sporting competitions. Pupils excel in music and hone their musical skills in playing various percussion, string and brass instruments, including the euphonium. You successfully balance all aspects of the curriculum to ensure that pupils develop strong reading, writing and mathematical skills.

Staff morale is very high. All staff are proud to work at the school and are of the view that the school is well led and managed. There is a strong culture of learning in the school. All staff I spoke with indicated their high appreciation of the training and development opportunities they are afforded. Newly qualified teachers benefit from good mentoring and support which helps to strengthen their teaching practice.

In your improvement plans, you have given priority to developing the role of subject specialists to ensure that they are effective in improving the quality of teaching and learning in their respective subjects. However, there is more work to do to develop the skills of those new to their roles. In addition, when we looked at work in pupils' books, observed teaching and talked to pupils about their learning, it was apparent that the most-able pupils are not sufficiently challenged, particularly in mathematics. As a result, some pupils do not attain the high standards of which they are capable.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders, governors and trustees ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. Staff are highly vigilant. The school's current safeguarding policy, available on its website, has been developed with close reference to the latest government guidelines on keeping children safe in education. Induction procedures for new staff are thorough and all appropriate checks are made on staff to ensure that they are suitable to work with children.

Designated safeguarding leaders are trained to a high standard. All staff are trained well to spot signs of neglect and abuse and know precisely what to do if they are concerned about the welfare of a child. Staff and most governors have had 'Prevent' duty training, which is part of the government's agenda for tackling radicalisation and extremism.

The pupils I met spoke confidently about internet safety. They have an excellent understanding of the potential dangers associated with using electronic devices, such as cyber-bullying. Pupils know that they can talk to any member of staff if they have a concern or worry. They are secure in their knowledge that any such concerns will be taken seriously and dealt with immediately.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry focused on reading. The primary reason for this was because while pupils' attainment at the end of Years 6 and 2 in 2018 was high, both at the expected and higher standards, their progress in reading was below average. However, current pupils are making strong progress in reading. This is partly because of the strategies you have implemented, including a bespoke small-group reading intervention programme, and due to the strong phonic skills and knowledge pupils have gained.
- For several years the proportion of Year 1 pupils secure at the national phonics screening check has been well above average. It was a delightful experience listening to pupils read: they did so with good intonation and great expression and enthusiasm. Those who needed to use their phonic skills used them well to sound out and read unfamiliar words.
- My next focus was to determine how well disadvantaged pupils are performing. Their progress at the end of Year 6 in 2018 was average in writing and mathematics and below average in reading. Disadvantaged pupils' attainment was also below that of other pupils nationally. You have taken decisive action to remedy this matter. The school's excellent tracking programme enables you to identify and support any pupil in danger of falling behind their peers. The impact is evident in the strong progress disadvantaged pupils make, as seen in the good-quality writing they produce and the well-executed problem-solving activities in their mathematics books. Additionally, your pupil premium governor is highly knowledgeable and works closely with senior leaders to monitor pupils' performance.
- For my third focus, I concentrated on early years provision. I was particularly eager to explore this area because the proportion of children attaining a good

level of development at the end of the Reception year in 2018 was average and not as high as in previous years. In addition, boys' overall performance was better than that of girls. After meeting with children and talking with leaders, including the early years leader, it is abundantly clear that all aspects of early years provision are good. Children enjoy learning and benefit from stimulating indoor and outside learning areas. They engage in various activities, including writing tasks and calculation activities, for sustained periods, and are highly cooperative. This was evident as children worked together to estimate the capacity of different water containers and measure ingredients for their cooking activities in the mud kitchen. Children's behaviour is impeccable. They use their wheeled toys safely, and with due consideration for pedestrians, tidy up immediately when asked and follow instructions carefully.

- Children attending pre-school provision get off to an excellent start. Staff are trained well, have a good understanding of how young children learn, and develop strong, secure bonds with children. This all helps to ensure that children are happy, safe and progressing well. Children settle into their classes quickly; they are highly inquisitive and enjoy exploring the world around them. Dedicated outdoor areas enable children to develop their inquisitiveness and appreciation of the natural world.
- My final line of enquiry focused on attendance and behaviour. The school monitors attendance closely in order to establish whether the performance of any group of pupils is adversely impacted by poor attendance. Current data indicates that all pupils attend school regularly. At 97%, pupils' attendance is above average and has been so since the school's inception.
- Pupils' behaviour is mostly impeccable. In lessons they listen carefully and answer questions eagerly. Pupils are very respectful of each other's views and are well mannered. They were very welcoming towards me; all were prepared to talk about their learning and give their views about the school. Pupils are of the view that behaviour is good and say that bullying rarely, if ever, happens in school. This is confirmed by school records. Pupils are highly resilient and perform their special responsibilities, for instance as junior school governors, eco warriors and mini police officers, earnestly.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- work is sufficiently challenging in mathematics, particularly for the most able
- new subject leaders play an effective role in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Lenford White
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I visited several classrooms, including all classrooms in the early years, to observe teaching, learning and assessment. Together with you and the vice-principal, we looked at work in pupils' books.

I listened to pupils read in Years 2 and 6 and held formal and informal discussions with pupils from across the school.

I took account of 65 text responses submitted by parents during the inspection and met informally with parents at the start of the school day. I also considered 69 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. Responses to the inspection questionnaires completed by 24 members of staff were also considered as well as 83 responses to the pupil survey.

I met with four members of the governing body, including a trustee from the Star Academy Partnership.

I examined a range of documents. These included the school's checks on the quality of teaching and reviews of its own performance, development plans, information about pupils' progress, records of pupils' attendance and behaviour, and safeguarding documentation.