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Mrs Lesley Beck
Headteacher
Sir Graham Balfour High School
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Dear Mrs Beck

Short inspection of Sir Graham Balfour High School

Following my visit to the school on 14 May 2019 with Ofsted Inspectors Rob Steed and Chris Stevens, 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 May 2014.

This school continues to be good.

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

Since your appointment as headteacher three years ago, you have looked to build on the existing strengths and maintain the high standards of pupils' behaviour. Leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have a strong understanding of the school's priorities. The school's core values and mission statement, 'Learning, working, succeeding together', are evident in the way in which both staff and pupils conduct themselves around the school. The implementation of your belief in distributed leadership has meant that various staff from across the school all play a role in helping to move the school forward.

The school has a warm and welcoming culture. Pupils at the school are courteous and are keen to share their learning experiences with visitors. Movement around the school at social times and between lessons is calm and orderly and staff routinely engage with pupils in a positive manner. Staff are proud to be members of the school community and are committed to improving their practice. Parents and carers are equally as positive about the school and are supportive of the work that leaders do. Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, shows that the vast majority of parents are happy with the education provided by the school and say that their child is safe.

Outcomes at key stage 4 have been broadly average for the last three years. In the

sixth form, outcomes for the last two years have been significantly below national averages. You have taken decisive steps to address areas of underperformance. In English, for example, you have sought external support to work with the department to identify areas of the curriculum that need to improve. In the sixth form, you have made changes to staffing and provided professional development to staff related to teaching at A level. Your assessment data shows that students in key stage 5 are now making better progress.

Governors have a clear sense of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They regularly seek the views of parents and staff so that they are fully informed of the school's work. Governors provide appropriate challenge to leaders in order to ensure that they review and refine their practice over time and make sure that the school continues to improve.

The school has maintained the good quality of teaching and learning since the previous inspection. Recent changes to your monitoring procedures have ensured that middle leaders have a more accurate understanding of their departments and of how to drive further improvement.

There remain some areas that the school needs to work on in order to improve further. The proportion of pupils taking the subjects at key stage 4 that contribute to the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) remains below the national average. It is not increasing quickly enough to meet the government's targets.

Leaders in the sixth form are not systemically analysing the performance of pupil groups in order to ensure that all groups of pupils make good progress. They have not ensured that all aspects of the 16 to 19 programmes of study are consistently planned.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school has a strong culture of providing good-quality care and support. Staff have a clear understanding of how to keep pupils safe and leaders provide regular training so that staff know how to identify potential risks. Leaders have developed strong links with external agencies and use these well to support vulnerable pupils. Your safeguarding newsletter provides parents with regular information regarding local community issues and how to keep their child safe. The school has clear procedures in place for parents who decide to electively home-educate pupils. Leaders put child welfare at the heart of what they do.

Pupils are overwhelmingly positive about the pastoral support they receive. They are clear about where they should go if they require help and assistance. Pupils stated that bullying is rare and that they feel safe in all parts of the school. The school's curriculum is well matched to issues in the local community and leaders are quick to respond to emerging needs. A recent incident has meant that all pupils have received age-appropriate road safety advice.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for

purpose and that child protection records are detailed, well organised and stored securely.

Inspection findings

- The inspection team first considered what the quality of teaching, learning and assessment was like across the school. Teachers create a positive learning environment. Pupils are well supported and readily engage with staff about how they can improve. Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and provide clear explanations to pupils.
- Pupils' work in a range of subjects demonstrates that they are making appropriate gains in knowledge and skills over time. Teachers are effectively sequencing learning so that pupils are able to make good progress and consolidate learning. Further work on consistent checks for pupils' understanding would ensure that teaching and learning improve further.
- Pupils demonstrate confidence in being able to use subject-specific terminology. In mathematics, pupils were able to discuss simplifying ratios fluently before applying this to activities within the lesson. Inspectors also observed pupils effectively engaged with problem-solving tasks as a result of recent changes to the mathematics curriculum.
- Inspectors also saw effective use of modelling. For example, in art, pupils were taught about watercolour blending before applying this to their own work. As a result, the standard of pupils' outcomes is high.
- The inspection team also considered what actions leaders are taking to improve outcomes in the sixth form and how well the sixth form is led. Outcomes in the sixth form for the last two years have been significantly below national averages. You are clear about the reasons for this and have taken steps to bring about improvement.
- Leaders have recently made changes to the sixth form in order to develop a more academic culture. You have also worked with staff to promote students' independence and learning outside of the classroom. As a result, inspectors observed a positive learning environment in the sixth form and a strong element of challenge. Leaders meet regularly to discuss the performance of individual students but further work is required to systemically monitor the performance of different student groups.
- Students are extremely positive about the sixth form and the support and guidance they receive. When meeting with inspectors, students highlighted pastoral care as a strength and described how they are helped to achieve their next steps in education, training or employment. Retention rates in the sixth form are extremely high and students have access to a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Last year, not all students completed some form of work experience. Leaders have taken action to ensure that this is in place for students in the current Year 12. Further work, however, is required so that all aspects of the 16 to 19 study programmes are coherently planned.
- The final area the inspection team considered was the school's curriculum. In key

stage 3, leaders have ensured that pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum which develops the skills and knowledge as outlined in the national curriculum.

- While you provide appropriate guidance to pupils when selecting their option subjects in Year 9, the proportion of pupils opting to study the EBacc combination of subjects at key stage 4 remains low. Changes to the modern foreign languages curriculum in key stage 3 are already starting to show an impact, with greater numbers opting for these subjects.
- Leaders have recently undertaken a review of the curriculum in order that areas of strength and development can be identified. Your leadership team has worked closely with middle leaders to help shape the curriculum at key stage 3, with a focus on knowledge retention and problem-solving. Consequently, this is having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the proportion of pupils taking the EBacc combination of subjects at key stage 4 increases to meet the government's targets
- the sixth form improves by:
 - systemically monitoring the performance of student groups to ensure that all make at least good progress
 - ensuring that all aspects of the 16 to 19 programmes of study are coherently planned.

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 Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Howes
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, members of the senior leadership team and the chair of the governing body. We also met with five heads of faculty. We visited 25 lessons and four house-time sessions with senior leaders, during which we observed learning and spoke with pupils about their work. We talked with many pupils at breaktime and lunchtime. We scrutinised several documents, including your self-evaluation, the school development plan and safeguarding and

child protection records. Parents' views were considered through the 86 responses to Parent View.