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Catherine Brooker, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Richard Crane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Areté Learning Trust
Station Road
Stokesley
North Yorkshire
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Dear Mrs Brooker and Mr Crane

Summary evaluation of Areté Learning Trust

Following the summary evaluation of Areté Learning Trust in July 2022, when I was accompanied by Matthew Knox, Her Majesty's Inspector, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the trust on 11 to 13 July. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of evidence gathering activities

For stage 1 of this summary evaluation, three schools were inspected between January and June 2022. All these inspections were carried out under either section 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- One school improved from requires improvement to good.
- One school retained the same judgement of good.
- One school had its first section 5 inspection as a sponsored academy. The school was judged good. The predecessor school had been judged inadequate in January 2018.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff. We met with two representatives of the board of trustees, including the chair of the board. We held a meeting online with a member of the trust board. We also talked remotely to members of the local governing body from each of the three schools.

All trust schools had been inspected during stage 1 of the summary evaluation process. During stage 2, inspectors visited all three trust schools for discussions on the impact of the trust's work. In each of these visits, we met with headteachers, subject leaders, school staff, pupils and central trust staff.

Context

Areté Multi-Academy Trust was established in April 2015. The trust serves three secondary schools. They are all situated in North Yorkshire local authority. One school joined the trust as a sponsored academy in September 2019.

The three secondary schools vary in size from 1,034 pupils in Northallerton School and Sixth Form College to 1,314 pupils in Richmond School.

The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged in the trust is lower than that seen nationally, although this varies from academy to academy.

The trust board is made up of eight directors. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight, direction and performance of the trust and its schools.

Main findings

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent inspections, are as follows:

- All three schools are judged to be good.

Impact of the trust on its academies – governance and delegation

- The trust's aspiration for every child 'being the best they can be' is shared across its schools. The three headteachers appreciate their autonomy in customising this broad vision to meet the needs of their individual schools and communities. The trust's executive leaders are bringing increasing cohesion to the work of the trust through quality assurance, stronger central services and professional development.

- Trustees and the central leadership team have high expectations for pupils across the trust. The CEO has developed a series of key performance indicators that enable trustees and their committees to check performance.
- Trustees have developed an effective scheme of delegation. They give local governing bodies responsibility for checking core aspects of each school's work, such as the quality of education, behaviour and safeguarding. Trustees are clear that they are accountable for school performance and have responsibility for the strategic direction of the trust. Members provide an important layer of objective checks on the trust's work through their bi-annual meetings.
- The chair of trustees meets with the CEO regularly to review performance. Ongoing quality assurance provides trustees with a strong insight into each school's strengths and areas for improvement. The central team's deep dives into areas such as special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) provide trustees with detailed insight into key aspects of school performance.
- Trustees have shown an ability to respond swiftly to requests for resources and staffing in order to improve trust performance. This support has contributed to trust-wide rapid improvement in areas such as provision for pupils with SEND.

Impact of the trust on its academies – leadership and management

- The trust holds central policies to ensure that standards of probity and sound financial management are upheld. Trust leaders invite scrutiny of governance at all levels to manage risk and to check the efficacy of their practice.
- Trust leaders have developed a clear set of strategic priorities. These include student support, educational standards and staff development. Recent inspection outcomes show that the trust is making positive progress in addressing these priorities.
- The CEO and his team have strengthened systems of accountability. The introduction of thematic and subject reviews is providing trustees with detailed information that is being used to inform more rapid improvement. This is evident in the work to improve SEND provision and the quality of careers education.
- The CEO and deputy CEO use their knowledge and experience to develop the expertise of staff. Headteachers are extending the impact of their work by leading on trust-wide initiatives. Associate senior leader roles are being developed to support succession planning.
- Local governing bodies have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. They have the expertise to check key aspects of performance on behalf of

trustees. They are increasingly mindful of the performance of their own schools in the wider context of the trust.

- Leaders anticipate and prepare for the trust's future needs. For example, they have recruited additional teachers in nationally and locally acknowledged shortage subjects. In addition, they have appointed specialist staff to support pupils in the trust's developing alternative provision based within one of its schools.
- The positive impact of trust leaders is reflected in the improving inspection outcomes for two schools and the sustained good performance of another. This impact is particularly evident in the good judgement for the one sponsored academy where the predecessor school had been judged inadequate.

Impact of the trust on its academies – curriculum and quality of education

- Trustees empower headteachers to construct a curriculum to meet the needs of their school communities. This autonomy is tempered by the rigorous quality assurance work of the central team. The findings from review activities closely inform curriculum planning and staff development.
- Leaders are establishing emerging networks to share good practice. Individual school training is enhanced by the input of the central team. A teaching and learning group shares principles of effective teaching across the trust. Trust leaders are developing digital networks to provide staff with access to resources and discussion forums.
- The CEO has directed high performing subject leaders to share their expertise with other schools. Subject coordinators have recently been appointed to make the sharing of subject expertise an integral part of the trust's work. Leaders accept that this work is at an early stage of development.
- In the sixth form, shared practice enhances the curriculum. Some subjects are co-delivered across the trust to widen the curriculum offer. Subject leaders in small, specialist departments, such as sociology and psychology, are benefiting from new professional networks.
- Executive leaders track pupils' progress across the curriculum. They are mindful that groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and boys, have not performed as well as their peers. They are working with staff to improve outcomes for these pupils.
- Central leaders recognise that there is variation in assessment practice across the trust. They are working with staff to improve how teachers check pupils' understanding and to provide more reliable information on pupils' curriculum progression.

Impact of the trust on its academies – Behaviour and Attitudes

- Trust leaders enable the headteachers to develop their own behaviour policies within a broad set of principles. The central team ensures that behaviour and attitudes are monitored closely. The work of school leaders, supported by the central team, has contributed to good standards of behaviour across all schools.
- The central team has recently reviewed strategies to improve attendance. This has led to a restructure of pastoral systems across the trust. Leaders know there is more to do to improve attendance for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND.
- As part of the changes to the pastoral system, the deputy CEO has trained new heads of year on the systems and processes that are being implemented to strengthen pastoral provision. While it is too early to see the impact of these changes, they are part of a trust-wide ambition to raise expectations and bring further cohesion to practice.
- The CEO provides trust leaders with regular updates on attendance and suspension. Trust leaders see patterns across all three schools in the trust and challenge where improvement may be needed.
- Trust leaders have been proactive in supporting the development of in-house alternative provision in response to the needs of pupils in the trust. This has contributed to marked improvements for some pupils at risk of exclusion. The trust has built on this initiative by directly employing its own alternative provision leader. This provision is providing stronger support for the most vulnerable pupils across the trust.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is given a high priority. The deputy CEO meets with the team of designated safeguarding leads regularly to review safeguarding practice. These meetings help leaders to develop a consistent view of the thresholds to consider when taking action to safeguard pupils.

The designated safeguarding leads work together to provide staff with training that is regularly updated. The trust has adapted the local authority safeguarding policy to meet the local needs of each school. As the trust grows, there are plans to appoint a central safeguarding leader.

Trustees and local governing bodies have a sound understanding of safeguarding. They receive regular updates on safeguarding standards at each school and benefit from training that helps them to fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities.

The CEO has a strong oversight of recruitment. He ensures that appropriate checks are in place across the trust with regard to staff recruitment. Relevant staff are suitably trained in safer recruitment.

Safeguarding was judged to be effective across all three trust schools in their recent Ofsted inspections. The trust has taken effective action to support safeguarding improvements at a school where significant concerns existed prior to it joining the trust.

Recommendations

- Continue to enhance the quality of education across the trust by increasing opportunities for staff to share and access best practice in the subjects they teach.
- Improve the consistency of assessment practice across the trust so that teachers are more assured of what pupils are learning and so that assessment information can be used reliably to support further improvement.
- Securely embed new pastoral systems to further enhance behaviour and to improve attendance for all pupils, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

School Information				Most recent inspection		
URN	School name	Local Authority	Date joined trust	Does the inspection relate to the school in its current form?	Inspection date	OE grade
141930	Stokesley School	North Yorkshire	2015-04-01	Yes	08-06-2022	Good
145090	Richmond School	North Yorkshire	2017-12-01	Yes	19-01-2022	Good
146969	Northallerton School & Sixth Form College	North Yorkshire	2019-09-01	Yes	14-01-2022	Good

*Schools highlighted received either a section 5 or section 8 inspection in stage 1 of the MAT SE