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14 September 2022

Alan Rogers and James Wilson  
Co-headteachers  
The Duchess's Community High School  
Taylor Drive  
Alnwick  
Northumberland  
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Dear Mr Rogers and Mr Wilson

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Duchess's Community High School**

Following my visit to your school on 14 July 2022, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school received a judgement of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspection.

This was the second routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. I discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

**The school continues to require improvement. Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action toward the school becoming a good school.**

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that the curriculum, particularly at key stage 3, is clearly planned and sequenced to a consistent standard in all faculty areas

- ensure that the curriculum is delivered to a high standard and consistently well across different faculties and subjects
- challenge inconsistencies in the application of the whole-school approach to improve pupils' behaviour
- ensure that pupils attend school regularly, particularly disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

## **Context**

Throughout the pandemic, you remained open to vulnerable pupils. The pandemic caused some turbulence in staffing, particularly in spring term when a significant proportion of school staff were absent due to COVID-19. Leaders have continued to work on improving the school. In particular, the development of the curriculums in English, science and art have been a priority. Likewise, leaders have focused on strengthening the key stage 3 curriculum across subjects and the support for pupils to develop reading. A new assessment system is being embedded, as is a management information system. You are implementing new approaches to improve the quality of teaching and improve pupils' behaviour.

Since the previous inspection in October 2021, there have been significant changes to the school leadership structure. The senior leadership team has been restructured with the appointment of six directors, each with specific responsibilities for whole-school improvement. Middle leadership has also been restructured with the appointment of eight heads of faculty to oversee all subjects in school. You have appointed a new subject leader in English, including a second in department. In other areas of the school, you have further developed pastoral support with the appointment of assistant heads of year. You have also appointed a data manager. At the end of term, 16 members of teaching staff will be leaving the school. You are increasing teaching capacity and have appointed 22 teaching staff to start next academic year. Four of the new teaching staff are early career teachers.

## **Main findings**

Since the last inspection, you have developed the school leadership structure. This has focused leaders' responsibilities on areas of the school requiring improvement. You have a clear and straight forward plan to significantly improve the quality of provision at school. Leaders know what their strategic priorities are. You have been determined to improve the curriculum, particularly at key stage 3. Leaders have developed plans to enhance pupils' personal development. You have also implemented new approaches to ensure that the curriculum is delivered to a consistently high standard in all subjects and improve pupils' behaviour, although these are being embedded and are inconsistently applied.

Leaders are taking effective action to improve the quality of the school's curriculum. Subject leaders are able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the subject areas they are responsible for and how they can support pupils to know and remember more. You

have prioritised this area of school improvement and have appointed a director of curriculum to lead the development work. Subject leaders have visited primary feeder schools to inform their classroom practice. This is developing teachers' understanding of what younger pupils know and can do, raising their ambitions.

In key stage 3, the curriculum is now more carefully considered. There is more work to do to ensure that this is of a consistently high standard across subjects. Nonetheless, subject leaders have ensured that pupils' main misconceptions are addressed in curriculum planning. Lessons now feature 'do now' retrieval activities and direct questioning. Across subject areas, leaders are developing staff to improve their open questioning techniques. In doing this, you hope to ensure that all pupils are included in lessons. The provision to teach reading has been strengthened, with appropriate support strategies to develop pupils' early reading skills. As a result, pupils are better prepared for their next steps.

Leaders are aware that attendance needs improvement, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. The previous inspection report indicated that disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND had lower attendance. This is still the case. Pupils that spoke to me reported that behaviour is improving. The atmosphere around the school was generally calm during the visit, with only minor instances of silliness. Learning environments were purposeful and staff interacted well with pupils. There were high levels of staff supervision needed to manage pupils around the school at break and lunchtime, however. This suggests some pupils are not ready to self-manage their behaviour. Inspection evidence also indicates that there is some inconsistency in the way that staff challenge any misbehaviour.

The pupils I spoke to were ambassadors for the school. Pupils could describe how the school supports their personal development. They told me how the school teaches them to keep physically and mentally healthy. They understood matters around 'consent' and sexual abuse. However, female pupils were more able to describe local safeguarding risks and the dangers of criminal exploitation. Pupils say they feel safe in school and that bullying is rare. Leaders have thought carefully about the types of personal development that would be beneficial to the pupils at the school. For example, in sixth form, students learn about next steps towards the world of work, college and university. This ensures all post-18 students are supported to positive destinations.

Governors provide support and challenge to leaders, remaining 'eyes on, hands off'. They know that more work is needed to develop the curriculum and believe that the results of curriculum changes will be seen next academic year. Governors recognise that their visibility needs to improve. They are keen to be involved in school life and want to support the school on its improvement journey.

### **Additional support**

You are outward facing and work well with the local authority. You have been proactive in seeking additional support from a school improvement partner and have also initiated support from a national leader of education. The external partners have supported you to

address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. This additional support has contributed to the improvements now seen in school. Governors are improving their practice and are supported by a diligent clerk. They have accessed training through the National Governance Association and developed their safeguarding knowledge. School leaders and members of the governing body value the additional support to move the school forward. They recognise that next academic year is crucial for the school as additional support begins to withdraw.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with the co-headteachers and other school leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with members of the governing body, groups of pupils, some staff and a representative of the local authority. I also spoke, by telephone, to the school improvement partner.

I toured the school with a leader to observe breaktime activities, visited faculty areas, scrutinised documentation, including school improvement and curriculum plans, and checked responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires for parents. I also checked recruitment systems and records.

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

Yours sincerely

David Mills  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**