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Mr John Dowler
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Dear Mr Dowler

Short inspection of Helsby High School

Following my visit to the school on 22 May 2018 with Ofsted Inspectors Craig Yates and Deborah Bailey, 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 February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

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

You have developed a very strong senior leadership team which successfully combines both well-established and recently appointed leaders. You have gained their loyalty and allowed them to fulfil their potential by valuing experience while welcoming new ideas.

In your school middle leaders play an important role in improvement. Subject and pastoral leaders appreciate the autonomy that you give them but understand clearly that they are accountable to you and to the governing body for standards and quality in their areas of responsibility.

Your staff are hard-working and loyal. They respond well to opportunities for reflection, continuing professional development and sharing best practice to maintain teaching of good quality. Pupils appreciate the very wide range of extra-curricular activities which staff provide for them, including residential visits in this country and abroad. Your school provides high levels of nurture and care, especially for vulnerable pupils. You have developed a skilled and dedicated pastoral team.

Governors bring a wide range of skills to their role. They show their commitment, not only by their attendance at meetings but also by regular visits to see the impact

that their policies are having on the life of the school. Their evaluation of the school is honest and accurate. They use performance management to good effect to improve the quality of teaching and leadership, bringing a good balance of challenge and support.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors asked you to accelerate further the progress of the relatively small numbers of disadvantaged and lower-ability pupils. They also asked you to improve the attendance of these pupils and the behaviour of the small minority who were causing minor disruption in school. You have addressed most of these areas very successfully.

You and your senior leaders carefully analyse the academic, social and financial difficulties that the disadvantaged pupils in your school face. You use the pupil premium funding to provide effective pastoral and academic support. The differences between this group and their peers have diminished over several years and are now very small. The progress that least-able pupils make from the end of Year 6 has improved year on year. This is particularly evident in mathematics and science.

Despite hard work with pupils and their families, your strategies for increasing the attendance of these two groups have not been effective. Although overall school attendance remains above the national average, you have not succeeded in improving the attendance of disadvantaged pupils or of those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities.

The behaviour of pupils in lessons and at social times is good. During the inspection pupils and staff confirmed that the new behaviour policy which you introduced at the start of this academic year has further improved pupils' attitudes and the staff's skills. The small number of instances of low-level disruption in lessons has decreased further.

Safeguarding is effective.

Staff have undertaken significant training and are aware that safeguarding pupils is the responsibility of all. The responses of parents and carers, pupils and staff to Ofsted's online questionnaires indicate that they have confidence in the school's systems and processes to keep everyone safe from physical and emotional harm.

Leaders make sure that adults are suitable to work with children and young people by carrying out stringent checks. Procedures to deal with allegations meet all requirements and involve the local authority and external agencies appropriately.

Staff teach pupils how to keep themselves safe when using the internet and social media. Leaders have put in place effective firewalls to ensure that neither pupils nor staff have access to inappropriate websites in the school.

A small number of pupils in Years 10 and 11 attend off-site institutions for part of the week. Staff ensure that these providers meet the school's safeguarding requirements.

Inspection findings

- I wanted to find out what lay behind the success of subjects such as humanities and the expressive arts in which pupils make very good progress. These subjects have benefited from long-standing good leadership and teaching. Staff apply departmental policies consistently so that ways of working are well established for staff and pupils. Teachers build frequent opportunities for assessment into schemes of work. As a result, they plan very effectively for the progress of individuals and groups. You share the best practice of your strongest departments via a termly teaching and learning report. Your Directory of Expertise and 'open door' weeks allow teachers to observe and learn from colleagues who have particular expertise or skills.
- I was interested to know why, for the last three years, in mathematics pupils did not achieve the GCSE grades of which they were capable. I wanted to know whether pupils currently in the school were faring better. There has been considerable instability in the leadership and staffing of this subject. However, a new head of mathematics took up post in June 2017 and he now has a full team of well-qualified subject specialists. These changes have increased expectations of teachers and pupils and ensured that teachers give sufficient time to developing the skills of reasoning and problem solving. The school's assessments and inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' work indicate that all year groups are making better progress than in the past. This is particularly true of Years 7 to 10 but is less evident for pupils in Year 11.
- I wanted to find out why, for the last three years, pupils underachieved in GCSE modern foreign languages and whether this situation had improved. In your school far more pupils of all abilities study languages at key stages 3 and 4 than in most schools across the country. In addition, the vast majority of pupils study two languages from Year 7. However, you and the head of modern languages recognise that, for most pupils, lack of curriculum time dedicated to the language which they will take to GCSE level has hindered progress. You have now ensured that from September 2018 the planned curriculum maximises the time available for pupils to progress well in one language while retaining the opportunity for some pupils to be dual linguists. The department has developed new schemes of work to meet the increased demands of the national curriculum. Consequently, pupils' progress is better than in the past. Nevertheless, curriculum arrangements currently continue to affect achievement adversely.
- In both mathematics and modern foreign languages strong support from a designated senior leader and well-devised plans for raising attainment are having an increasingly positive impact on standards and quality. However, you and both heads of department agreed with me that these subjects remain a priority for development.
- I wanted to know whether most-able pupils, especially boys, were now reaching their full potential in subjects, including mathematics, English and modern foreign

languages, in which they have underachieved in the past. More effective assessment and tracking ensure that teachers now match work more closely to pupils' capabilities and prior attainment. From key stage 3 onwards teachers make very good use of GCSE grade criteria to show pupils how to improve their work to achieve the highest levels. In addition, targets set from Year 7 represent higher expectations of achievement than they did under the previous system. Our scrutiny of pupils' work and your own assessment information indicate that most-able pupils are now nearer to reaching their full potential. Nevertheless, this remains a focus for development and the sharing of best practice by those subjects such as humanities in which most-able pupils excel.

- Your school's examination results show that boys make less progress than girls, particularly in English. You recognise that your previous system for setting targets resulted in lower expectations of boys than of girls. You have now rectified this. The new arrangements for mixed-ability teaching in English are paying dividends in terms of boys' attitudes to learning. The online homework programme, with automatic reminders for parents and pupils, now ensures that most boys build on what they have learned in class. The progress and attainment gaps between boys and girls are narrowing in Years 7 to 10 but this is less evident in Year 11.
- Students in the sixth form enjoy their studies. The school achieves higher rates of retention than the national average. The percentages of students who move on to education, employment or training and to higher education are also higher than national figures. However, in the last two years, although the overall progress made by students was average, there was a decline in some subjects. In the light of examination results and group sizes you no longer offer some courses. For current students the decline in progress has been reversed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- ensure that the progress of boys, especially those who are most able, continues to improve so that it at least matches that of girls
- consolidate recent improvements in mathematics and modern foreign languages
- improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities.

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

Yours sincerely

Liz Kelly
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection I had discussions with you, your leadership team and members of the governing body. Jointly with you and subject leaders, I and my inspector colleagues observed teaching. We spoke to a range of pupils in lessons, in discussion groups and at social times. My colleague listened to pupils read and scrutinised reading records. With you and your senior and middle leaders we looked at a wide range of pupils' work. We analysed the website and a range of documents, including the single central record, records of child protection and staff training, the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning. We discussed with senior leaders aspects of safeguarding, attendance, behaviour, the sixth form and the use of funding. We spoke to a cross-section of teachers and middle leaders. We considered 77 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including 62 free-text comments made by parents. We also considered 372 responses to Ofsted's online pupils' questionnaire and 85 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.