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Mr Kieran McGrane
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Dear Mr McGrane

Short inspection of Ponteland Community High School

Following my visit to the school on 19 October 2016 with Alexandra Hook, Ofsted Inspector, 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 March 2012.

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 established a culture of high expectation, grounded in a shared commitment to high-quality teaching and learning to deliver the best possible outcomes. You have strengthened senior and middle leadership such that the capacity for sustained improvement is strong. Your pride in your pupils and your staff team is reciprocated as they value the increased challenge you have brought to the school since your arrival. As a result of strong leadership, rigorous systems and effective teaching, pupils achieve high standards and make good and improving progress.

School leaders act with an integrity and openness that pervade much of the school's work. You have diligently followed an academic curriculum based on the best interests of your pupils. The vast majority of pupils follow a modern foreign language, rather than the less rigorous options that can flatter in performance tables. The school curriculum is enhanced by an extensive programme of extra-curricular activities. This enables pupils to develop wider personal and social skills through sport, charitable activities and political engagement, as well as musical, dramatic and even scientific performance.

Middle leaders are entrusted with clear responsibilities for checking the quality of teaching and learning within their departments. They have customised whole-school priorities and processes to meet the needs of their subjects. Middle leaders hold their teams to account for the quality of their teaching and their pupils' outcomes, and carry out appraisals of their teams. This has contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching and in the rates of pupils' progress.

Governors are committed to the success of the school and work closely with senior leaders to secure ongoing improvement. They have the skills and expertise to question leaders effectively, as was evident in the increased challenge they brought to address underperformance in English in 2014/15. This challenge contributed to much stronger outcomes in summer 2016. Governors ensure that there is a clear link between teachers' performance and pay progression, and question pay recommendations assiduously. They value the openness that the headteacher has brought to the school as this enables them to check progress more accurately. Governors have considerable pride in pupils' academic improvements and also in the breadth of sporting and cultural activities that have enriched the school over the last four years.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school actively promotes a culture of safeguarding and leaders take their responsibilities for pupils' welfare very seriously. Rigorous checks are made on the suitability of staff. Staff and governors receive up-to-date training on key safeguarding issues. They have a clear understanding of how to react if they have concerns over the welfare of a child. School leaders set clear school rules that promote a safe and respectful culture.

Inspection findings

- Your singular focus on improving the quality of teaching, which was an area for improvement at the last inspection, has led to a climate where teaching is consistently good. Teachers follow school policies to develop pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding in a systematic way.
- Over time, pupils achieve levels of attainment that are significantly above those seen nationally. Pupils' progress is good and improving across a range of key subjects, although some differences persist in languages and technology and in the progress of disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders have effective systems in place to monitor the quality of teaching and learning. Their quality assurance programmes include regular checks on lessons, work in pupils' books and pupils' progress. The ongoing work of middle leaders is supported by more formal department reviews that inform the improvement process. Support, such as training and coaching, to address issues in teaching is readily provided, and this has helped to secure good improvements in teaching and learning since your arrival.

- Teaching in mathematics and science remain strong due to good planning, clear exposition and opportunities for pupils to apply learning. These factors enable pupils to make good progress in mathematics and science.
- In geography, inspectors could see how imaginative planning made the study of hurricanes meaningful and relevant, while elsewhere pupils actively learned from one another to deepen their understanding of climatic change.
- Senior leaders worked diligently with subject leaders and teachers to address underperformance in English in 2015. They consulted external partners and incorporated more formalised assessments to prepare pupils for the rigour of examinations. Governors also tracked the ongoing implementation of the improvement plan. As a result of these actions, pupils made much higher levels of expected progress and accelerated progress in English in 2016. However, not all pupils make the same strong progress in all their subjects that they do in English, mathematics, science and humanities.
- Pupils demonstrate high levels of courtesy and politeness towards one another and adults. They routinely hold doors open for others and conduct themselves in a calm and orderly manner on corridors and around the site. Relationships are strong as pupils and teachers greet one another warmly around the site. It is clear from conversations that pupils feel valued as teachers know them as individuals. Positive behaviour in lessons supports effective learning as pupils listen attentively and act swiftly on instructions to complete tasks effectively.
- Pastoral leaders work closely to track pupils' attendance and to develop strategies to support pupils with higher rates of absence. However, these strategies have not yet secured consistent improvements. Overall attendance remains slightly below national, with figures for persistent absence above those seen nationally. In addition, disadvantaged pupils are much more likely to be absent or persistently absent than their peers. In 2016, the vast majority of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 failed to achieve good levels of attendance, according to the school's own measure.
- Strong leadership of the sixth form has contributed to very effective 16 to 19 study programmes. New tracking systems are contributing to much higher retention rates as students are guided to the most appropriate courses and provided with ongoing support to help them succeed. Students receive good-quality careers information and guidance, which supported all students in achieving highly successful transition to university, apprenticeship or employment in 2016. Heightened expectations on attendance and the use of study time have contributed to a studious atmosphere.
- In lessons, sixth-form students show considerable maturity and engage confidently in high-level discussion and debate. Sixth-form outcomes remain impressive and the average points score for A-level students continued to improve in 2016 while vocational outcomes remained extremely strong. However, overall academic progress declined slightly in 2016, showing the need for further challenge for students who have increasingly higher levels of attainment on entry to the sixth form.

- Leaders are developing more bespoke packages to support the needs of disadvantaged pupils as they realise that generic approaches have not diminished differences in achievement as fully as they would like. While there are signs that the majority of disadvantaged pupils are making improving progress in English and mathematics, differences remain in their rates of strong progress and in the progress they make across a wide range of subjects.
- Leaders have close personal understanding of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and care passionately about their progress. Parents value the 'excellent support' of the special educational needs coordinator and her willingness to respond to the individual needs of pupils. There is evidence of bespoke provision that has contributed to improving progress for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in recent years. While there is some variability in 2016 outcomes, the vast majority of pupils successfully progressed to post-16 study or apprenticeship.
- Teachers are effectively meeting the needs of the most able pupils as reflected in the widespread improvements for most-able pupils across all key measures in 2016. An increasing proportion of most-able pupils achieved A* and A grades, particularly in mathematics and across the sciences. The vast majority of disadvantaged most-able pupils make good progress in English and mathematics that compares well with other pupils nationally. However, their rates of stronger progress in mathematics and other subjects remained slower than that of their peers.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should take steps to:

- reduce overall rates of persistent absence and improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils
- refine strategies to improve the rates of progress of disadvantaged pupils so that differences between these pupils and other pupils nationally continue to diminish
- build on the academic attainment of students when they join the sixth form to enable them to make stronger rates of progress
- ensure that the strong and improving progress in subjects including English, mathematics and science is consistently matched across a wide range of subjects.

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 website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of the inspection, we looked at the quality of teaching and pupils' progress in a number of key subjects, including English, mathematics, science, humanities and modern foreign languages. Inspectors examined the achievement of key groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the most able pupils. We considered the effectiveness of post-16 provision and explored safeguarding and attendance.

During the inspection, we met with you, senior leaders and middle leaders. I also spoke to a large group of governors, including the chair and vice-chair. We held a meeting with a group of pupils, and talked to pupils less formally in lessons and at lunchtime and morning break. Inspectors also talked to the school improvement partner and a local authority representative. We undertook learning walks with senior leaders and carried out our own additional observations. We also looked at pupils' work in books and folders. Inspectors examined the school commitment plan as well as other documents including the school's self-evaluation, assessment information, behaviour and attendance information, and pupil tracking. We also examined safeguarding documents, including the single central record. I took into account 156 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, 96 free-text responses and 44 responses to the staff questionnaire.