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9 March 2016

Mrs Anne Hill
Principal
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Dear Mrs Hill

Short inspection of Northampton Academy

Following my visit to the school on 25 February 2016 with Michael Wilson, 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 January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

You and the leadership team, including governors, have established a culture of high aspirations and ambition. You have an unrelenting approach to school improvement and pupils know that expectations are high for them. You are acutely aware of the context of the school, levels of deprivation and the challenges that many pupils face, but this serves as no barrier to your aims and ambitions for all the young people in your care. Consequently, pupils and teachers rise to this challenge and outcomes are improving quickly. Disadvantaged pupils, who make up nearly half of the school, are now making as much, and sometimes better, progress than other pupils in the main school. In the sixth form, disadvantaged learners go on to achieve good outcomes in the courses they undertake, and a large proportion have taken up places at university. Despite poor literacy skills upon arrival at the school, pupils go on to make exceptional progress in English.

The school is part of a large multi-academy trust, The United Learning Trust. The sponsor supports the improvement plans and has made a positive difference to many departments more recently. The trust has been able to draw upon its network of skilled professionals to support subject leaders, especially for mathematics, humanities and science. Although there remain some inconsistencies in the quality of teaching in humanities and science, leadership in these subjects is improving and pupils are on track to make much better progress than previously. Subject leaders, including new appointees, speak highly of the support and guidance they receive from you and the senior leadership team.

Subject leaders know and understand their subject areas' strengths and weaknesses well. In addition, they understand the whole-school priority improvement areas. They have become much sharper in identifying trends of underperformance through careful analysis of pupils' assessment information. They are rigorously held to account by senior leaders. Improved quality assurance systems have resulted in rapid improvements in many subjects, especially mathematics. A sharp focus on improving the outcomes for the most-able pupils has resulted in good and improving outcomes for this group.

A particular weakness cited in the previous inspection was pupils' attendance. This has improved significantly. Overall, attendance is now better than national averages. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent (absent more than 10% of the time) is reducing quickly. They are supported well to improve their attendance. Behaviour has also improved. Fixed-term exclusions are now below national averages and incidents of poor behaviour in the school are reducing quickly. There have been a few isolated incidents of bullying; these are taken seriously by staff, dealt with robustly and not tolerated. Pupils and staff say the positive atmosphere and good behaviour is due to excellent pastoral support systems and good relationships between adults and pupils and between pupils. You have invested well in the welfare and care provision for pupils. The pastoral care for pupils is very effective.

Leaders have demonstrated a strong track record of improvements. While the quality of teaching is becoming more consistent, boys' achievement is improving quickly, and outcomes in mathematics, science and humanities are also improving. These issues rightly remain high priorities for the school, as you and senior leaders strive for even better standards. You acknowledge that there is still work to be done to get the school to achieve even better outcomes.

Safeguarding is effective.

You chair a local safeguarding group to support improvements locally. Arrangements for safeguarding at the school are effective. Safeguarding leaders, including the human resources manager, are well trained and knowledgeable. Safer recruitment is practised well and is well established. The child protection officer is particularly experienced. As a result of her excellent knowledge and understanding of safeguarding, there are robust systems and structures in place to ensure that staff and pupils are well prepared to deal with all safeguarding matters. Lines of communication are clear and both staff and pupils know how to raise concerns; the fact that these systems are used well is testament to the open culture and sense of responsibility adopted by the school.

There is a well-advertised whistleblowing policy. The designated safeguarding leader and the child protection officer keep meticulous records of referrals and all concerns raised. These records show safeguarding leaders take timely action. Also, they have a tenacious approach to ensuring that local professionals support young people and their families when they are supposed to. The curriculum supports the culture of safeguarding. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe online and avoid risky behaviours.

All staff have completed a Channel Awareness course (a course designed to train staff about how to identify and refer potential risks regarding extremism and radicalisation) and a 'Prevent' action plan has been drawn up by leaders. Older pupils are encouraged to discuss current affairs, including ideologies that promote extremism. In so doing, the school is helping pupils to understand the dangers of these viewpoints in undermining British values. Governors keep sound oversight of the school's safeguarding arrangements. The school is highly regarded by the local authority as a beacon of good practice regarding safeguarding matters.

Inspection findings

- The school's self-evaluation is accurate and insightful. Leaders have carried out a robust evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The improvement plans are thorough and rooted in clear success criteria.
- The local governing body (LGB) and sponsors are knowledgeable about school improvement. They take a proactive role in holding leaders to account for the pupils' achievement. In September, the LGB met with each subject leader to hold them to account for recent examination results. They contribute to the setting of ambitious targets for the school. They hold you to account extremely well.
- The leadership team has improved the quality assurance systems and practices. These include regular 'Laser' meetings, in which subject leaders are required to account for each pupil's current achievement. The accuracy of departmental pupils' assessments is tested through a variety of checking exercises both internal and external.
- The quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils in English is consistently excellent. Pupils make excellent progress from each starting point. Attainment remains well above average for the second year in a row. The department has been consistent and stable. Pupils enjoy this subject and develop their literacy skills well.
- The school's work to improve the outcomes of the most-able pupils is effective. The progress of this group of pupils last year and their progress currently show a marked improvement compared to previous years. Leaders keep the progress of this group high on teachers' priorities by monitoring pupils' progress rigorously and devising bespoke intervention strategies. Those pupils in danger of not achieving their target of A or A* also receive intervention during period seven lessons, which are after school.
- Those subjects whose results were disappointing last year, such as science, mathematics and humanities, have received additional support and scrutiny to ensure that results improve in 2016. Leadership positions have been replaced and the new appointments to these departments are proving effective. Thoroughly verified current assessments show that these departments are now on track to make good progress. Attainment is now close to national averages. Where there remain inconsistencies in the quality of teaching, leaders take action. The leadership team understand the need to bolster support for these departments to ensure that there is sustained improvement.

- Teachers' support plans are in place for a few teachers to help them improve their practice. There is a wide range of training and development opportunities. Teachers and leaders acknowledge that more opportunities to share good practice would contribute to greater consistency in the quality of teaching.
- The curriculum has been radically overhauled in light of new, more demanding examination requirements at Key Stage 4. The Key Stage 3 programmes of study now include a core thread of 'mastery' for all subject areas, which has promoted greater challenge for pupils. All subject leaders have identified a clear set of knowledge and skills, against which pupils' work is assessed. As a result, pupils are clear about what is expected of them.
- The leadership of special educational needs is effective. The small but increasingly challenging group of pupils who receive special educational needs support are making better progress. The learning support assistants work well to help pupils make the progress they should; they are trained well by the coordinator and they keep accurate records to support pupils' learning plans. The nurture group, set up for Year 7, is proving effective. Pupils in this group receive tailored support to meet their needs. Information about their progress shows that these pupils are catching up with their peers quickly.
- The pastoral team provide effective and valued support for pupils. Pupils speak highly of the team of people available for their support and guidance. New appointments to the attendance monitoring arm of the team are extremely effective. As a result of their tenacious approach, attendance levels have improved dramatically. Engagement with parents has been stepped up and this has proved effective, especially in improving the attendance and behaviour of those hard-to-reach individuals. Exclusions have radically reduced due to the simple, effective and consistently applied behaviour systems. Records show that the few incidents of poor behaviour are tackled robustly and the number of repeat offenders is extremely low. While the majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire believed that the school managed behaviour well, a small minority say that this could be improved.
- Outcomes in the sixth form are good and improving. Eighty-eight per cent of learners go on to university. The school boasts a record 25% of those going to the prestigious Russell Group universities. Attendance and retention rates are high. The sixth form leader is committed to ensuring all learners receive the best support they can; she is ambitious for all learners and sees disadvantage as no barrier to achievement. Over 50% of the learners in the sixth form receive bursaries, and excellent guidance is given to them to make sure these learners are prepared well for the next stage in their education. No learners leave the school without employment, education or training placements.

Next steps for the school

- Ensure that the support of new leaders is in place and monitored to help drive improvements, especially in science and history.
- Monitor and support improvements in the quality of teaching across the school further, so that more teaching matches the best in the school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Zarina Connolly
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, two representatives of the local governing body, two members of the United Learning Trust, the sixth form leader, subject team leaders for key subjects, pastoral leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, and other senior leaders. Inspectors visited 14 parts of lessons across the main school and the sixth form, including the school's 'reflection' time. Some observations of teaching were jointly undertaken with senior leaders. Inspectors also observed pupils' behaviour around the school, at break and lunchtimes, and during lessons. Inspectors spoke with three groups of pupils formally and others during lesson observations. Inspectors considered the views of 55 parents posted on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. Pupils' workbooks were scrutinised. Inspectors considered a range of documents, including, the school's self-evaluation, the school's improvement plans, pupils' performance information, behaviour records and safeguarding records and policies.