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Mr David Hermitt
Executive Principal
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Dear Mr Hermitt

Short inspection of Congleton High School

Following my visit to the school on 10 January 2018 with Timothy Gartside, Ofsted Inspector, and David Woodhouse, 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 December 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, alongside your head of school, have been successful in establishing a respectful and orderly environment where staff and pupils can work as a team. 'Achieving success together' is the school's motto. The strong team ethos means that everyone helps each other. The relationships between teachers and pupils are highly supportive. This allows pupils to ask for help when they need it and to learn from their mistakes. Staff feel highly valued. The pupils with whom inspectors spoke were complimentary about the help that they receive from teachers. You, with the help of your leaders, have created an inclusive school where you aim to get the best out of everyone.

Parents, carers, students and pupils are loyal to and supportive of the school. Over 90% of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire would recommend the school to another parent. Similarly, the pupils and students with whom inspectors spoke would recommend their school to a friend. Students and pupils welcome the opportunity to help each other. For example, sixth-form students enjoy being 'homework mentors' for younger pupils. Staff are proud to be members of the school community. They speak very highly about the way in which you and your leadership team carefully balance your ambition for excellence with support. Staff feel that leaders listen to them and believe that their well-being is a high priority. As a result, they receive the help and encouragement that they need to be able to excel in their own professional development.

Those responsible for governance are also passionate about ensuring that the school is inclusive. Some pupils join Congleton High School in key stage 4, after they have attended another school previously. Sometimes, these pupils have developed weak patterns of attendance or poor attitudes to learning. Governors welcome these pupils with open arms and strive to ensure that they have the opportunity to do well, irrespective of their previous experiences.

At the last inspection, some weaknesses were identified in the governance of the school. This is now not the case. Governors and trustees offer a diverse set of high-level skills from a range of backgrounds. These skills allow them to ask appropriate and direct questions of school leaders. Individual governors are linked to different subject areas; this has further developed their knowledge of the school. It also ensures that those responsible for governance are acutely aware of what still needs to be done. They are enthusiastic and committed to securing the best possible outcomes for pupils. In order to achieve this, they provide a high level of challenge to you and your leadership team.

You and your head of school are honest in your evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses. You have put measures in place to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. At the last inspection, inspectors asked you to improve the quality of teaching at key stage 3 so that the most able pupils make better progress, especially in mathematics. During this inspection, scrutiny of pupils' work showed that teachers now provide appropriate challenge for the most able pupils in mathematics. Pupils are making better progress as a result. When challenged, the supportive culture of the school means that many pupils help each other alongside the support that they receive from their teacher. This was particularly evident in a Year 9 mathematics lesson, where pupils were finding solutions to equations. Across the curriculum, teachers use effective questioning. This allows pupils to learn from their mistakes. Highly positive relationships between teachers and pupils ensure that pupils receive feedback and support when they need it.

At the previous inspection, inspectors also asked you to improve teaching to ensure that disadvantaged pupils were engaged in lessons. This was in order to ensure that disadvantaged pupils made better progress. Leaders and teachers now have high expectations for all pupils, including those who are disadvantaged. For the most part, teachers plan learning that is appropriate to the needs of pupils. Pupils have positive attitudes to their learning. As a result, pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, are more engaged in their learning than they used to be. Disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress in a number of subjects – for example, in mathematics, English and humanities – than they did at the time of the previous inspection. Disadvantaged pupils are also making better progress because of the extra support that they receive through leaders' use of the pupil premium funding. Nevertheless, although differences between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers are diminishing, you agreed with inspectors that there is more to do. In particular, school leaders need to work more effectively to ensure that those disadvantaged pupils who join the school late are able to make better progress. Leaders need to review and refine their approach to their use of pupil

premium funding. This will allow them to focus on the approaches that are successful.

Following the previous inspection, you introduced a different assessment system. This supports teachers to increase the level of challenge, which helps to prepare pupils for the increased rigour of the GCSE examinations. The system allows teachers to provide pupils with the information that they need to make further progress. Pupils with whom inspectors spoke were highly positive about the help and feedback that they receive from their teachers, which support them to make better progress. Mostly, they welcome the opportunity to improve their work. Teachers are also confident that the assessment system enables them to plan learning which is appropriate for pupils. Work in pupils' books shows that teachers are matching activities well to pupils' needs and pupils are making better progress as a result.

Since the previous inspection, you have introduced a system to allow you to monitor the quality of teaching more effectively. As a result, there is a consistent approach. Leaders use a range of evidence to inform their evaluations of teaching and learning. This has improved the accuracy of their judgements. This system has enabled you to identify specific aspects of teaching and learning, such as improving the level of challenge for the most able pupils. You are then able to provide bespoke training where staff need it most. You and your staff have adopted a collaborative approach to developing teaching. Consequently, there are more opportunities for staff to share best practice. Your rationale for this is that you believe teachers are able to 'plan better lessons when we plan together'. Staff welcome the opportunity to work with other teachers through links and partnerships with other local schools.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding pupils is everyone's priority. They have created a community that is alert to the risks faced by children. Governors regularly check systems to ensure that they are up to date and fit for purpose. The system to ensure that adults are suitable to work with children meets requirements. Records of work with external agencies are well organised, clear and detailed. They demonstrate leaders' tenacity in following up referrals to ensure that children are safe.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff receive regular training on safeguarding and leaders frequently provide updates to ensure that staff are abreast of current issues. As a result, staff demonstrate a sharp awareness of the current challenges faced locally. Staff teach pupils how to keep themselves safe online. This includes teaching pupils about the dangers of social media. As a result, the pupils with whom inspectors spoke feel confident in keeping themselves safe online.

Pupils explained to inspectors how they appreciate having an adult in school they can talk to if they have a problem. They feel safe and happy at school. The

responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents indicate that parents also have confidence in the systems in place to keep their children safe.

Inspection findings

- Historically, compared with national figures, the attainment of pupils at the end of Year 11 in most subjects is above the national average. When considering the results that pupils achieved when they left primary school, the progress pupils make in most GCSE subjects is similar to that of pupils nationally. Pupils make exceptionally strong progress in humanities. The progress made by pupils in mathematics, particularly the progress made by the most able pupils, is improving.
- At key stage 5, sixth-form students make similar progress to learners nationally across the curriculum. The proportion of students who have not achieved a standard pass in English at key stage 4, and resit this successfully in the sixth form, is above the national average.
- In 2017, disadvantaged pupils at Congleton High School made less progress than non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. This was particularly apparent in English. However, through improvements in the leadership of teaching and learning, you have taken effective steps to improve the progress made by disadvantaged pupils. In a scrutiny of pupils' work in English, inspectors observed disadvantaged pupils making equally as good progress as their peers at key stage 4. This is because teachers skilfully adapt questions to allow pupils to complete more challenging tasks. For example, in English, pupils write articulately about the changes in Juliet's feelings in the play 'Romeo and Juliet' by William Shakespeare.
- I was particularly interested in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and of those pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. This is because, historically, the attendance of these pupils has been lower than that of their peers. Staff encourage good attendance and it has a high profile among pupils. You have put in place a number of initiatives. You begin by identifying those who have poor attendance at primary school and work closely with their families to encourage improvement. Other initiatives include mentoring, providing transport for pupils and competitions that encourage good attendance. The difference in attendance for all pupils and that of these groups is beginning to diminish. However, school leaders and the inspection team agree that there is still more to be done to ensure that attendance is not a barrier to success for these pupils. We also discussed leaders' overall strategy to improve attendance. Leaders could improve this further if they took a more systematic approach in determining which measures are the most effective.
- I was interested to know how well pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are taught. The inclusive culture of the school means that more pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are choosing to join the school. Historically, the progress made by this group of pupils has not been good. You have taken steps to improve the progress these pupils make. For example, the way in which leaders identify pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities has been refined. Leaders have changed the way in which teaching assistants work with pupils to speed up this process. This ensures that teachers and teaching assistants can provide support for these

pupils at the earliest opportunity. You have also made changes to the curriculum. This is in order to provide additional support for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities when they join the school. This has been effective in securing better outcomes for some of these pupils. Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities at the school are making better progress. However, inspectors and leaders agreed that the school needs to further refine its approach to secure even better outcomes for these pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to improve the attendance and reduce the rates of persistent absence of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities
- they review and refine their approach to the support they are providing for disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and those pupils who have attended other secondary schools previously.

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

Yours sincerely

Emma Gregory
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection I had discussions with you, your leadership team, some members of the governing body and some of the trustees. Jointly, my colleagues and I visited classrooms with senior leaders. We spoke to pupils formally, during lessons and at social times. We analysed the school's website and scrutinised a range of documents, including the single central record, records of child protection, leaders' self-evaluation and the school improvement plan. We also looked at anonymised case studies of pupils in the school. We discussed aspects of safeguarding, attendance and behaviour and the use of funding. We spoke to a number of staff, including middle leaders and newly qualified teachers. We considered 92 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. We also considered 100 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for pupils and 100 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.