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Mr Robert Diment
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Dear Mr Diment

Short inspection of Plymstock School

Following my visit to the school on 7 November 2017 with David Herbert and Sue Frater, Ofsted inspectors, 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Governors have overseen significant changes over the last 18 months, including your appointment as headteacher. A number of senior leaders have changed their roles. Most recently, the school joined Westcountry Schools Trust, a multi-academy trust of five secondary and seven primary schools in and around the city of Plymouth.

Standards at Plymstock School have improved over recent years. The key stage 4 results in 2017 are particularly strong. As a result, pupils were able to continue to courses in the sixth form, at college or as part of an employment-based training programme. Outcomes in the sixth form also improved with those following applied learning courses making strong progress.

The recently introduced 'Ready to Learn' programme has improved pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning. Pupils have embraced this and we found the school to be a calm and orderly environment. Pupils were actively engaged in their learning, responding to and asking pertinent questions. They show good manners to each other, staff and visitors.

At the previous inspection, inspectors asked school leaders to improve the quality of teaching so that learning is more tightly planned to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities. You and your colleagues have introduced a carefully crafted assessment system. This is well understood by staff and pupils. Consequently, teachers are able to use this information to plan learning activities which better meet pupils' needs. Leaders' close tracking of pupils' progress allows timely and effective interventions where necessary.

Leaders were also asked to make sure that more pupils make rapid progress by sharing the excellent practice employed in the best subjects. Improving achievement in most subjects in all year groups demonstrates that an increasing proportion of pupils are making strong progress. However, you are aware that there are small groups of pupils for whom progress is not as rapid as you or your staff expect. You have reviewed actions and made the necessary changes but it is early days and so the impact is yet to be seen.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that staff and volunteers are trained in identifying and supporting pupils who face risks, including from radicalisation and extremism, sexual exploitation and when pupils go missing from education. Staff are clear about how to report any concerns. Your leaders with specific responsibility for child protection are clear about how to refer cases to the local authority and the police, where appropriate. The culture of safeguarding is strong.

Changes over recent years have strengthened relationships with the parents of pupils at Plymstock School. This has yielded very positive results, especially in improving pupils' attendance so that they do not miss out on learning. The 'Teaching and Learning Zone' is particularly effective in helping pupils who have mental health or physical illnesses to continue to participate in learning. Pupils know who they can talk to if they are worried and are confident that actions would be taken to resolve any matters.

Appropriate checks are made of staff before they start employment. You are aware of the need to fully test systems to eliminate any weaknesses and sharpen the record-keeping of child protection files. While members of the local governing body carry out their duties, there is room for development so that they can increase the rigour of their work. Trust leaders have already begun work on this, for example by sharing good practice through the Trust's safeguarding forum.

Inspection findings

At the start of the inspection, we agreed the particular aspects of the school's work that the inspection would focus on.

- The first area of the school's work we explored focused on your work to improve the outcomes for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. In the past, these pupils had not made the progress that they should.

You were aware of this and appointed a member of your senior team to take over the strategic leadership of this area of the school's work. Significant changes over recent months have brought about rapid improvement, particularly for those pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Leaders' thorough review of the provision and evaluation of the interventions allowed them to identify priorities for improvement. They worked swiftly and now are much better at identifying pupils' specific needs and matching the support more closely. The training teaching assistants have received is ensuring that the challenge and support they give to pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan are bringing about improvements in what these pupils know, understand and can do. Consequently, the progress of key stage 4 pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan has improved dramatically from the bottom 10% of schools nationally in 2016 to a position in line with all pupils nationally in 2017.

- This strong improvement has not been replicated for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities but do not have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Teachers have not yet had the training they need to meet the specific needs these pupils have when they are planning learning or supporting these pupils in class. This group of pupils continue to make slower progress than their classmates.
- The second area we considered was the impact pupil premium funding is having on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. In 2015 and 2016, disadvantaged pupils made less progress than their classmates and other pupils nationally in some subjects, including English. Leaders have thoroughly evaluated the impact of the use of funding received in the last academic year and used their findings to plan actions for this year that are helping pupils overcome the barriers to their learning. Strategies, including additional teaching at home for some pupils, are having a positive impact. There is also a notable increase in the number of disadvantaged pupils who are participating in extra-curricular activities. The visit to Oxford University by a group of Year 10 most-able disadvantaged pupils earlier this year has opened pupils' eyes to the opportunities available to them when they leave school. As a result, they are clearer about how to achieve their raised aspirations. Assessment information and pupils' work show that the most able disadvantaged pupils are making rapid progress. Other disadvantaged pupils are making good progress although not quite as rapidly as the most able.
- The effectiveness of the design of the curriculum and careers advice, especially for boys, was the third area we looked at. While attainment is broadly similar for pupils across the subjects they choose, the progress they make is not. You have strengthened the provision of careers advice in school. This is integral to the school's life education programme in key stage 3 and the 'EPIC' curriculum in key stage 4. All pupils are well served by the careers advice they receive, which they value highly. This now starts in Year 7 and so by the time pupils choose the courses they wish to follow in key stage 4, they have already had opportunities to explore different careers. Consequently, pupils in Years 10 and 11 are now following courses that they are better suited to. Leaders have also reviewed the

qualifications offered in both key stage 4 and the sixth form and changed some courses so they better prepare pupils for their future careers. There are no noticeable differences between boys and girls in the progress they make or their attitudes. Consequently, pupils are successfully continuing to the next stage of their education.

- Variability in progress in subjects across the sixth form in recent years gave rise to the next area that inspectors explored. New leaders in the sixth form have carried out a detailed review and are driving improvements fervently. Students appreciate the strong pastoral support and the guidance they receive from your well-trained staff when they are applying for university places. In subjects that have been weaker in the past, leaders have worked with their colleagues to improve the quality of teaching and as a result outcomes have improved. This is particularly the case in applied general qualifications. However, there is still some variability between A-level courses. Nevertheless, outcomes for all students improved in 2017 and more students than before progressed to their first choice of university course.
- Our final area of interest was pupils' attendance and their safety. Attendance has been low for a number of years since the previous inspection. You have invested heavily to improve this and your investment is yielding dividends. Attendance has risen year on year and is now in line with the rates seen typically nationally. The attendance of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities has improved considerably. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has also improved but they still attend less frequently than their classmates. Your staff and the local authority's education welfare officer work well together. They have forged good relationships with pupils and their families. As a result, you are able to provide support to families who are struggling. Your systems are robust and so you are able to quickly alert the appropriate agencies when you are concerned that a pupil may be missing from education or at risk from harm. The life education programme and focus days through the year help pupils to think about their own safety and they report that they are well prepared to consider any risks they might face.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching staff receive the training they need to better plan learning to meet the needs of pupils who need support with their special educational needs and/or disabilities
- standards rise further in the sixth form by sharing the best practice in school across all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Iain Freeland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors observed learning in classrooms, reviewed pupils' work and looked at the school's assessment information. We were accompanied by senior leaders in all these activities. Inspectors spoke with pupils in lessons, at break and at lunchtime. One inspector heard pupils read and another met with a group of Year 11 pupils. Meetings were held with you, senior leaders, the strategic lead for careers and the school's careers adviser. The lead inspector met with the chair of the multi-academy trust board, the chief executive and a member of the local governing body.

We scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation and development plan, assessment information and safeguarding records. I considered the views of 132 parents who responded to Parent View and the responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires of 26 pupils and 123 members of staff.