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Mr David Shield
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Shield

Short inspection of Seaham High School

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 2017 with John Downs, 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 June 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. At the previous inspection you were asked to continue to improve teaching, reduce absence and narrow achievement gaps of pupils. You have been successful in doing so.

Since the previous inspection, you have managed a period of substantial change, both in staffing and in a move to completely new school premises. This caused some temporary slowing of progress for some groups of pupils in some areas, particularly those who are disadvantaged or pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Despite this, you have kept a keen watch over all pupils and staff and have not been afraid to tackle underachievement when it has been identified. You have made sure that your new middle leadership team is equipped, supported and able to lead their areas of responsibility with a sense of ownership, accountability and purpose. This is leading to a school that continues to improve outcomes for all pupils over time.

Your team is working closely with you to tackle weaknesses, successfully. As a result, the previous differences in progress between groups of pupils are diminishing well. Seaham High School's support for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding is a strength throughout the whole establishment. I was impressed by the way your teams were able to respond quickly, efficiently and thoroughly to any questions and requests for information that inspectors had during the inspection. All leaders and school governors share a passion for sustained

improvement with you. They know their roles well and have the determination to ensure that the school continues to grow and succeed.

Published GCSE examination results from last year show that pupils' progress was strong overall. However, the progress of some groups of pupils, for example pupils from typical starting points and the most able in mathematics, all groups of pupils in science and disadvantaged pupils in languages and humanities, were not as strong as you would have liked. This is not now the case. Inspection evidence demonstrates that pupils are making good progress in all year groups overall. Disadvantaged pupils are also making good progress currently, although this group's achievement remains a priority area of focus for the school.

You have tackled poor attendance swiftly and with diligence by targeting and encouraging pupils and parents to increase their participation in school. This has resulted in the school's overall attendance now being above national averages. Despite strong improvement in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils, there remains a small group of these pupils for whom attendance is still not as good as it should be. However, your teams are tackling this issue with an unwavering approach and are determined to ensure further success.

Fixed-term and permanent exclusions are now reducing well as the school settles into its new premises. You recognised that the high levels of exclusions seen historically were not acceptable and you have already reduced the number of pupils who receive them, successfully. However, you accept that more needs to be done to bring rates of exclusion further into line with national expectations, particularly for some pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils.

Governors know the school and its needs well. They are each linked to specific areas of the school's work and they have a good understanding of what is working well and what needs to be better. This enables governors to hold you and your leaders to account for the impact of your work effectively. Governors and local authority staff maintain a strong challenge to you and your leaders so that you are robustly held to account for the school's continued improvement.

The importance you have placed on high-quality teaching continues to support improvement in pupils' engagement within lessons and their progress throughout their studies. This is resulting in at least steady and often good improvements in all subject areas. Learning walks my colleague and I carried out where we visited pupils in their lessons, at random, show that pupils are highly engaged in their studies and responsive to the challenges that their teachers give them. Scrutiny of pupils' books shows that they have high levels of personal pride in their work and are making sustained progress over time. Middle leaders recognise any differences in achievement that still exist, astutely. Leaders are determined to further reduce differences between pupil groups as staffing has now become more stable, particularly in mathematics and science, and the move to new premises is complete.

Parents, staff and pupils are all overwhelmingly positive about the school. Pupils

know the extra facilities open to them outside of school hours are wide, varied and supportive of their individual needs. Many choose to take part in this enhanced curriculum. A clear majority of parents and pupils would recommend Seaham High School to others and this is testament to the ethos you and your teams have established over the years.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team ensures that all safeguarding requirements are met. Staff receive regular training. This ensures that adults' knowledge and skills surrounding safeguarding and extremist behaviours equip them to support pupils effectively. Pupils are supported to understand risks to their safety and learn how to keep safe. Pupils say that bullying is very rare and is quickly challenged by staff. Almost all parents agree. Inspection evidence shows that the school is diligent in collecting any information about bullying that does occur and pupils themselves say that they feel confident to report any issues should they arise. Pupils believe that behaviour has improved since the previous inspection.

Inspection findings

- You have a knowledgeable team of senior and middle leaders who know their roles well. This means that any areas of weakness are targeted quickly and effectively and ensures that rates of progress are maintained. You are successful in holding all leaders to account for the impact of their work.
- Middle leaders are able to identify and state with accuracy and honesty any areas for improvement; they are keen to secure continuous improvement. Leaders work closely with teachers to ensure that pupils' progress is tracked and interventions are used to improve standards. Teaching assistants are deployed by teachers to support the progress of all pupils in their classroom skilfully. This means that high levels of challenge are maintained throughout the lessons.
- Leaders' monitoring of the quality of teaching in school has ensured that teachers are challenged to develop their skills and effectiveness, consistently. This has resulted in more lessons that engage and interest pupils and is leading to pupils' improved behaviours and attitudes in class.
- Lessons are generally planned well and set at appropriate levels to ensure that pupils can understand the tasks they are given. Pupils are usually challenged to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding with more depth. However, despite recent improvements, some Year 11 pupils from average starting points in mathematics, all groups within science and disadvantaged pupils in languages are not yet making the progress they should. These areas remain a focus for improvement as leaders ensure that recent gains are maintained and further enhanced.
- The attendance of pupils currently in the school has improved quickly so that overall it is now above the national average. There have also been improvements in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. For example, although disadvantaged pupils' attendance remains below national expectations, it has increased by over 2 percentage points compared to the same period last year.

- There has been an ongoing and effective reduction in the use of fixed-term and permanent exclusions over the last few years. Currently, there have been 15 fewer exclusions compared to this time last year. The use of permanent exclusions has halved. However, the use of exclusion as a tool to support good behaviours and higher expectations continues to feature more than it should.
- Leaders have developed a system of curriculum pathways for pupils in all year groups. This enables pupils to follow the curriculum that is best suited to their needs, aspirations and abilities. Pupils are now placed into an appropriate pathway that allows them to access lessons that engage and interest them. They move between pathways where necessary as their skills develop. This equips pupils well to move to the next stages of their learning and to ensure that both challenge and choice is maintained. The curriculum is broad and balanced for all.
- Pupils behave well around the school. My colleague and I observed pupils as they walked between lessons, during lessons and at breaktimes. Pupils are smart, confident and polite young people who are interested in their school, their progress and their future when they leave school. This is a direct result of the positive ethos you have cultivated with staff, governors and parents over time.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they further improve attendance and reduce exclusions, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, so that they match national averages
- good rates of progress are maintained, consistently, for all pupils in science, pupils from typical starting points and the most able in mathematics and disadvantaged pupils in languages.

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

Yours sincerely

Colin Scott
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection my areas of focus included:

- the success of leaders in improving academic outcomes for all groups of pupils, in particular the most able pupils in mathematics, pupils with typical starting points in mathematics, all groups of pupils in science, and disadvantaged pupils in languages and humanities

- the impact of actions taken by leaders to improve attendance and reduce exclusions, particularly for those pupils who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
- the extent to which the curriculum offered to pupils matches their needs and aspirations and allows them to flourish
- the ability of leaders to further improve the quality of teaching so that it results in higher standards for pupils, particularly in mathematics, science, languages and humanities.

I held meetings with you and senior and middle leaders. I also met with four governors and had a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority's education development service. I spoke to pupils throughout the day and my colleague met formally with a group of pupils. I scrutinised books across a sample of subjects as well as records of governing body minutes, local authority reports and responses to Ofsted's own online surveys for parents, staff and pupils. My colleague and I both carried out learning walks with you and one of your deputy headteachers to ascertain the level of challenge, standards of behaviour and progress being made by all groups of pupils. I reviewed school improvement plans and spoke to you and other leaders about your self-evaluation and your aspirations for the school.