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Mr Phil Cook
Principal
Stockton Riverside College
Harvard Avenue
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Dear Mr Cook

Short inspection of Stockton Riverside College

Following the short inspection on 21 and 22 November 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in April 2014.

This provider continues to be good.

You, your leaders and governors have a clear vision to place Stockton Riverside College at the centre of the local community and ensure that local learners receive a good-quality educational experience. This focus has resulted in a culture of high expectations for learners and staff that is both challenging and supportive.

Leaders and governors have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college. You, your leaders and governors have identified clearly the areas that require further improvement and the actions that you need to take. You and your leadership team swiftly responded to reverse a decline in the proportion of learners achieving their qualifications in 2015/16. Managers hold heads of department to account well for the quality of provision, the outcomes for learners and the financial performance of their areas of responsibility. As a result, a significantly higher proportion of learners achieved their qualifications in 2016/17.

You and your leadership team have maintained the strengths at the previous inspection and have been highly effective in ensuring that learners develop work-related skills and attitudes to a very high standard, with most learners completing work placements that support and enhance their understanding of employment.

You have made progress to address the majority of weaknesses from the previous inspection. The proportion of learners achieving their functional skills English and mathematics qualifications has steadily risen since the previous inspection and a

significantly larger proportion of apprentices complete their programmes in the planned timescale. However, the progress that learners studying level 3 courses make and the proportion of learners on study programmes who achieve good passes in their GCSEs still require further improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

Learners and apprentices feel safe around college and at work, demonstrate safe working practices and know how to keep themselves safe in their everyday lives. They understand the local risks around radicalisation and extremism and know what to do if they feel unsafe. Leaders carry out suitable pre-employment checks on all staff. Safeguarding officers and welfare staff maintain effective links with external organisations and professionals where required, such as the local authority and local charities, to support learners.

Managers have introduced a new system that enables designated safeguarding officers to keep and maintain very comprehensive records around safeguarding concerns, the interventions they take and the impact of these actions on keeping learners safe.

The lead governor for safeguarding ensures that the board is fully briefed about any safeguarding concerns. Appropriate and effective training is in place for all governors and staff to help them understand their responsibilities around safeguarding and the prevention of radicalisation and extremism.

Inspection findings

- Leaders, managers and staff ensure that learners successfully develop the skills and knowledge that employers need. Learners understand the importance of punctuality, dressing appropriately and communicating effectively. Learners benefit from professional resources and environments, as well as high-quality input from employers and external experts that enables them to develop their skills further. For example, learners in performing arts work with a choreographer from a West End theatre to produce and perform in professional productions at local theatres.
- Where relevant, most learners benefit from very well-planned, helpful and relevant work experience placements that support them to practise their subject-specific skills. This helps them to make informed choices about their next steps. Work experience coordinators provide good support to help learners select the most appropriate placement for them.
- Learners and apprentices receive good initial advice and guidance that prepare them well for learning and ensure that they are starting the right course. They receive good-quality careers guidance during their courses that prepares them well for what they want to do next. As a result, most learners and apprentices move on to employment, or further or higher education, on completing their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers have been highly effective in increasing the proportion of

learners who achieve their functional skills English and mathematics qualifications. This increased significantly in 2016/17 and is now high. Teachers carefully check what learners are already able to do in English and mathematics at the start of their courses and use this information well to ensure that learners know what skills they need to develop further.

- Senior leaders and governors have overseen the improvement in the teaching of English and mathematics within the college, including the appointment of specialist advanced teaching and learning coaches. An innovative partnership arrangement with a local high-performing secondary school has contributed to the development of teaching practice in the English curriculum, and similar plans are in place for mathematics in 2017/18.
- Although improving, the proportion of learners on study programmes who regularly attend GCSE English and mathematics classes is too low. As result, too many learners make insufficiently rapid progress on these courses.
- The proportion of apprentices who achieve their qualifications within the planned timescales in all but two subject areas is high. This has improved significantly since the previous inspection. However, not enough of the few apprentices who study at higher level achieve their qualifications.
- Staff monitor the progress of apprentices closely and take swift and effective action when apprentices start to fall behind in their learning. Staff use their high levels of industry expertise well to make apprentices' theoretical learning relevant to their job roles. Regular and comprehensive visits from assessors ensure that almost all apprentices make the progress expected of them, with many achieving their qualifications quicker than planned.
- Apprentices benefit from timely and effective feedback that enables them to understand the work that they are completing, and this helps them to make good progress towards their qualifications. However, for too many apprentices, feedback is not specific enough to help them improve their written work. As a result, too many apprentices do not know what they need to do to produce better work and do not develop their writing skills well enough.
- College staff have productive relationships with employers and offer a flexible approach to learning depending on the employer's needs. Employers are active in the planning of apprentices' on- and off-the-job training and monitor apprentices' progress closely. Where employers are not working effectively with apprentices, senior leaders take the decision to stop working with these employers.
- Staff monitor learners' progress well. In the large majority of vocational subjects, staff focus well on supporting learners to develop the skills and knowledge that they need to complete their qualifications. When setting targets, staff take into consideration learners' starting points and current skills. Most learners benefit from helpful targets that enable them to develop their personal and social skills. In most cases, current learners are making expected progress towards achieving their targets.
- Learners like, and regularly use, the online tracking system that enables them to see their own progress towards achieving their qualifications. In the majority of vocational subject areas and in English and mathematics functional skills, learners

know what they need to do to improve their work. They understand how they are going to do this and have clear and challenging targets to work towards.

However, a small minority of staff do not set learners sufficiently challenging targets both in learning sessions and over time. As a result, a small minority of learners make slow progress. In GCSE English and mathematics, too often the targets set by staff are too complicated and do not enable learners to understand fully what skills they are being asked to develop. As a result, too many learners make slow progress on their GCSE courses and do not achieve a good pass.

- The large majority of learners studying on level 3 academic and vocational courses in the past two years have not made sufficient progress based on their starting points. This represents a small proportion of the college's total number of learners. Actions taken at the start of this academic year to improve learners' progress on level 3 courses have started to have a positive impact. These include more rigorous monitoring of learners' progress and a closer focus on the performance of individual teachers. As a result of these actions, the majority of current learners who started their programmes this year have made a positive start and are working well towards their target grades.
- The proportion of learners on A-level programmes who remain on their courses is low in many subject areas, and this is likely to have a negative impact on the college's results at the end of the current year. Managers have taken actions to address this issue; however, it is too early to see the impact.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all teachers fully implement the target-setting and progress review procedures so that they have a better understanding of learners' progress and can provide rapid help when learners start to fall behind in their programme
- the attendance of learners on study programme at English and mathematics lessons significantly improves, particularly in GCSE classes, so that the proportion of learners who achieve good passes in GCSE English and mathematics continues to improve
- the feedback that apprentices receive about their written work helps them to improve their writing skills
- the proportion of level 3 learners achieving their full potential based on their previous qualifications increases quickly by:
 - monitoring closely the impact of actions taken in 2017/18 to improve progress, and accelerating the pace of change
 - reducing the proportion of level 3 learners who leave their courses early.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ken Merry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The deputy principal (curriculum and quality), as nominee, assisted a team comprising three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Ofsted Inspectors. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and the previous inspection report. They met with senior leaders, managers and governors. They used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the letter. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.