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Mrs Sally Cryer
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Cryer

Short inspection of Unity College

Following my visit to the school on 30 January 2018 with Annette Patterson and Sheldon Logue, 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 June 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

You, the governing body and all staff have been working very hard to improve the school. There are some areas, however, that are not showing sufficient improvement. There is much to celebrate about the school. The progress pupils make in mathematics and science is very strong. This is a contrast with the progress that pupils make in English and some other subjects. Pupils' attitudes around school and in class are positive and they behave well, yet rates of absence and exclusion are high. Weaknesses in the quality of teaching, curriculum and leadership have all contributed where progress of pupils is slow.

The quality of teaching is undoubtedly improving. Inspection evidence, including inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' work, confirms that improvements are particularly evident in design and technology and in history. Improvements in the teaching of English are also apparent. However, the current rate of improvement in pupils' progress, while stronger than last year, is not fast enough to mitigate previous underachievement. So, in English, for example, many pupils have a great deal of catching up to do if they are to reach their potential.

The ability of leaders to analyse accurately information they have about the effectiveness of the school is variable. Many leaders cite hard work and an extensive

range of strategies as evidence of improvement rather than considering the impact of these initiatives.

School leaders have achieved some success in addressing the areas for improvement described in Ofsted's 2014 report. Pupils' literacy levels have improved through carefully implemented, whole-school strategies. All teachers accept their role in improving literacy and have had good guidance on how to do this. Pupils are now much more confident in expressing their views and in their written communication. Pupils' reading skills have also improved. However, as demonstrated by the variable rates of progress in the school, across subjects and different groups of pupils, leaders have more to do to improve the quality of teaching so that it is typically good or better.

Safeguarding is effective.

There are many strengths in the procedures to ensure that pupils are safe. All staff are well trained and know how they should react if they have concerns about a pupil's well-being. There is a large and effective team whose responsibilities include safeguarding. This team has very effective systems for managing and monitoring pupils who may, for whatever reason, be more vulnerable than most to potential dangers. Key staff maintain very good relationships with external agencies who also have responsibilities for promoting child safeguarding. Leaders ensure that pupils educated through off-site providers are well looked after and the school communicates well with these providers. Procedures to recruit suitable staff meet requirements. Pupils themselves are well educated about threats that they may experience and how to deal with them. These include potential dangers from social media and from within their local communities.

Poor attendance and high rates of exclusion limit the effectiveness of safeguarding procedures because it is significantly more difficult for staff to ensure that pupils are safe when they do not attend school.

Inspection findings

- While the school recognises achievement needs to improve in some subjects, including English, and that the progress made by some groups of pupils needs to improve, leaders are not fully aware how significant these deficiencies are. Currently, boys are progressing about half a grade behind girls and this difference is greater than it was last year. Disadvantaged pupils are currently progressing over half a grade behind the average for the year and again this is worse than last year. The school's analysis of last year's results points to underachievement of most-able pupils as a major contributing factor where achievement was not good enough. You have ensured that much work has been done to improve how well teachers teach the most able pupils in their classes. Inspectors directly observed teachers using strategies intended to extend the most able pupils' understanding. However, the school's tracking information provides inconclusive evidence about the impact of these strategies.
- In an attempt to raise achievement, you have adopted a curriculum model where

pupils study a broad and balanced curriculum for two years. They then opt for fewer subjects that they carry on to examination level. This gives them longer to focus on these subjects. This strategy was unsuccessful last year as some of the weakest progress in the school was seen in these subjects. Slow rates of progress were due to weak teaching. You and other leaders rightly question how appropriate some examination courses were for some pupils. Senior and subject leaders have introduced new courses with the intention of more closely meeting pupils' needs.

- Despite an extensive range of strategies, attendance has not improved. A fifth of pupils attend, on average, only four and a half days per week. Rates of exclusion are high and not decreasing quickly enough. Pupils' lack of attendance at school, for whatever reason, is having a detrimental effect on their education, both academic and in their personal development.
- For the majority of pupils, school is a positive experience. Pupils say that they are both happy and feel safe in the school. They say that bullying is rare and on the few occasions when it does happen, school staff deal with it promptly and effectively. Pupils believe this to be a school where everyone, from whatever background, can fit in without prejudice. Pupils enjoy the extensive range of resources available to them and the additional experiences available beyond timetabled lessons. They believe behaviour to be good. They say their classes are generally not significantly affected by distracting behaviour but that the quality of teaching is variable. Parents are typically very supportive and appreciative of the work of the school. However, a few who contacted inspectors raised concerns about provision for high-achieving pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders at all levels improve their capacity to use information more accurately and more rigorously to evaluate the impact of strategies adopted to improve the school
- they continue to improve teaching so that it is less variable in quality and more typically as good as the best practice seen in the school
- pupils make better progress in English and in the other subjects in the school where pupils' progress has been slow
- different rates of progress made by groups of pupils diminish, including the progress of disadvantaged pupils and boys
- teachers are clearer about the progress that their pupils should make and leaders are able to intervene quickly when pupils' progress slows
- they continue to develop the curriculum, leading to improved progress
- attendance improves, in particular reducing the numbers of pupils that are persistently absent
- they reduce the number of times exclusion is used as a sanction and reduce the number of pupils that experience exclusion.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Mackenzie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we worked with you and senior leaders throughout the day. We discussed many aspects of your school, we visited classes and scrutinised pupils' work. I met with four members of the governing body and spoke with a representative of the local authority. We spoke with groups of pupils during their breaktimes. We scrutinised school documents including safeguarding checks and information about pupils' achievement. We examined child protection information. We took account of the responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. We also took account of 46 responses from staff to an inspection survey. We considered the views of 38 parents who texted me their comments and 44 pupils who completed a survey.