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Dr Rob Petrie
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Dear Dr Petrie

Short inspection of Cockermouth School

Following my visit to the school on 22 May 2018 with Andrew Johnson, Ofsted Inspector, and Ahmed Marikar, Her Majesty's 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in May 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

As a result of your passion and hard work, and with the very strong support and challenge provided by school governors, Cockermouth School has gone from strength to strength. Throughout your tenure as headteacher, you have accurately evaluated the strengths of the school and the aspects that needed improvement. You have acted quickly and effectively to improve the school. A diverse range of pupils find academic success and are enriched through an extensive range of opportunities that promote their personal development. Pupils are served well by Cockermouth School.

Whether pupils leave Cockermouth School at the age of 16 or 18, they move on to good-quality courses and training with confidence. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very strong. Cockermouth School pupils are very well equipped to become successful members of the wide range of communities they will encounter as they become young adults.

Pupils speak of how happy they are at school and this is evident when seeing them during their social times and moving from lesson to lesson. Pupils generally attend school well. They are punctual between lessons despite the challenges posed by a site that, although well managed, consists of a labyrinth of narrow corridors and linked buildings. Pupils say there is little bullying and when it does occasionally

happen, staff deal with it promptly and effectively. In lessons, pupils are attentive and confidently contribute their ideas and opinions. Pupils usually present their work with care and accuracy. Pupils say there are few interruptions to their lessons through low-level misbehaviour.

At the last inspection, one of the two main areas identified as in need of improvement was the general quality of teaching. You have made raising standards in teaching the single most important aspect of your school improvement plan, believing this will drive up all aspects of the school. Teachers are more aware of pupils' different starting points and plan learning activities accordingly. Leaders of subjects and departments are taking more responsibility in improving teaching. They offer more support and challenge to teachers in their charge. The quality of teaching is improving and rates of pupil progress are increasing. One of the school's deputy headteachers has introduced a new approach to professional development, which has engaged teachers' enthusiasm to take more responsibility for their own professional development. However, it is too early to evaluate the success of this approach on raising pupils' achievement.

The second main theme for improvement was to bring greater consistency in the achievement of pupils. You and your predecessor have clearly been successful in this. You have systems to monitor the achievement of pupils and most of the school's senior leadership team are skilled in using this information to evaluate how well pupils and teachers are performing. Consequently, you can normally identify any dip in performance quickly. This enables you and senior leaders to investigate the reasons for underperformance and provide strategies that will rapidly address impediments to improvement. This has ensured that there is greater consistency in the achievement of pupils across all subjects.

Ofsted made a visit to Cockermouth School in May 2015, three months after your substantive appointment as headteacher. They had concerns about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. At that time, it was clear to the inspection team that you shared these concerns and that you had already begun to address this weakness. You and your governors are beginning to see some success resulting from the extensive range of strategies that have been used to help disadvantaged pupils. Other leaders and teachers are now beginning to accept that, as individuals, they have a responsibility to make up for the disadvantage that these pupils have as they arrive in Year 7. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are improving and are beginning to catch up with those of other pupils in the school. You have rightly identified that many strategies focus on disadvantaged pupils in Years 10 and 11 and that more needs to be done in accelerating the progress of disadvantaged pupils from their first day in school.

An analysis of the text comments sent by parents and carers to the inspection team revealed a wide range of opinion about the quality of leadership, education and care provided by the school. The picture presented by this survey broadly matched that of a survey recently conducted by school governors. You show no complacency by focusing on the majority of responses that were highly positive. You are taking the outcome of the governors' survey of parents' views as another opportunity to

improve the school and are taking steps to address the issues raised.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils' highly positive and trusting relationships with their teachers are a major contributory factor in ensuring that safeguarding in this school is secure. Pupils themselves are caring and take responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others. If a pupil had concerns about their own safety, they would confidently speak to a member of staff. In addition, pupils are effectively taught to identify potentially dangerous situations and how to respond to them. This includes when using social media and when in their communities. There is a strong caring culture throughout the school.

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. Leaders ensure that pupils educated through off-site providers are safe. Key staff maintain good relationships with external agencies that also have responsibilities for promoting child safeguarding. Procedures to recruit suitable staff meet requirements. Leaders ensure that confidential logs of concerns and actions are well maintained and provide accurate information. Leaders inform teachers appropriately about how to support pupils who may be experiencing difficult situations in their personal lives.

Inspection findings

- School leaders identified some variation in the progress made by different groups of pupils in recent years. They have adopted different and successful strategies to reduce these discrepancies in the performance of groups of pupils. The overarching driver to improvement has been the improving quality of teaching throughout the school. Leaders have considered the curriculum pupils follow and adjustments have been made to ensure that it, on the whole, meets the needs of all groups of pupils. More detailed, accurate and frequent monitoring of pupil progress has enabled prompt responses to dips in achievement. So now, pupils with low levels of prior attainment make largely similar rates of progress to those with higher levels. Pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities are particularly well supported and make strong progress. Pupils who receive support through the school's resourced provision for pupils who have autism spectrum disorder make rapid progress, both academically and socially. The school is very successful in supporting these pupils to develop confidently in mainstream classes throughout the school. With the exception of pupils currently in Year 10, rates of progress made by disadvantaged pupils are not as rapid as other pupils in the school, but improving.
- Overall, pupils make strong progress and standards are rising across the school. Pupils are particularly successful in science. The group of leaders within this department ensure that expectations, both of teachers and of pupils, are high. Teachers use their very good subject knowledge and successful learning activities to engage and motivate pupils. Senior leaders have improved the quality of leadership within history which has seen a consequential improvement in pupil

progress in this subject. Pupils are making strong progress throughout year groups.

- This school provides an important part of post-16 provision in west Cumbria. Throughout key stages 3 and 4, pupils are given good-quality and impartial guidance about their future educational plans. So, on leaving Year 11, pupils join a range of different colleges and schools, including Cockermouth School's sixth form. It offers a good range of A levels and some applied level 3 courses. Results last year represented a considerable improvement over the year before and placed the sixth form well within the top-performing 20% of post-16 providers in England. All groups of students achieve well, including disadvantaged students, who last year outperformed other students. Highly effective leaders of the sixth form systematically promote students' personal development and their leadership skills. They provide a very wide range of opportunities for students to volunteer, to help younger pupils and to take part in high-quality events both in and out of school. Leaders of the sixth form appreciate the importance of high-quality and meaningful work experience. They provide a diverse range of opportunities for students to develop skills that they will need when in paid employment, for example working in teams and managing difficult situations. While most students take part in a week-long work experience, others take the opportunity to work in care centres or primary schools on Wednesday afternoons, gaining valuable experience for their future. Leaders arrange for students to listen to successful people from a range of backgrounds, inspiring students to have high aspirations and to strive for success. Leaders have deliberately and systematically developed a culture within the sixth form that supports students' transition to university. Students are taught how to self-study responsibly and effectively. While not in timetabled lessons, students are encouraged, where appropriate, to work in groups, learning from and supporting each other. Examination success, ambition, strong personal development and very good guidance all contribute to Cockermouth School sixth formers moving on to high-quality courses and employment.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to increase the rates of progress made by pupils who are disadvantaged so that they are similar to those of other pupils in the school.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cumbria. 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 closely with you and senior leaders throughout the day. We discussed many aspects of your school, and we visited classes and scrutinised pupils' work. I met with seven members of the governing body. 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 considered the views of 99 parents who expressed their opinions via Ofsted's free-text service.