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Mr Daniel Carter
Principal
The Thetford Academy
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Dear Mr Carter

Short inspection of The Thetford Academy

Following my visit to the school on 30 November 2018 with John Wilson and Nicola Hood, 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 December 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.**

Since your appointment as principal in September 2018, you have acted swiftly and decisively to address a decline in standards. Your high expectations and clear direction have enabled pupils to feel positive once again about their school. Working with school leaders, you quickly identified the strengths and priorities for improvement and have the support of the vast majority of parents, staff and pupils.

Pupils and staff spoke appreciatively about the improvements in culture and ethos. Standards of behaviour had significantly declined and many pupils and parents said this was a great concern. You have introduced strong classroom and corridor routines, which ensure that pupils are able to enjoy their lessons with fewer interruptions. The number of pupils sanctioned for poor behaviour has risen sharply but this reflects the high standards that are now expected. Inspectors found orderly conduct around the school. Pupils were polite and friendly and working diligently in lessons.

You are seeking to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school. You and your leaders rightly evaluate the sixth form as needing to improve and there are sensible plans in place to secure the improvements needed.

You have set about strengthening the leadership within the school. Leaders have not taken sufficiently effective action to tackle the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. Many of the weaknesses identified at the last inspection remain.

Governors, although hardworking and committed to the school, had not been effectively challenging leaders to ensure that they were accurately informed about the progress of pupils and how successfully leaders were dealing with other school priorities. Governors and leaders were not clearly focused on the school's curriculum and standards of leadership. This led to a significant fall in standards of pupil behaviour, attendance and GCSE examination outcomes in 2018.

Governors now have a good awareness of the school's challenges and a clear understanding of what needs to be done to secure improvement. They are better placed to provide appropriate challenge and support to you and your leaders.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding procedures are thorough and fit for purpose. Administration relating to recruitment and training is up to date. Leaders are well aware of local safeguarding issues and ensure that staff and pupils are given strategies to deal with these effectively. Leaders have made the relationship between home and school a priority and are rightly proud of the way staff engage with families and offer support.

Pupils say they feel safe. They are taught how to keep themselves safe, including online. The programme of safeguarding education encourages pupils to engage in discussion and pupils can find support easily from the large, high-profile safeguarding team. Pupils say, since September 2018, the school is better in dealing with bullying if it occurs and they feel that staff care for them well.

Leaders are tenacious in ensuring that other agencies, including the local authority, respond to any concerns the school raises.

Inspection findings

- While interim principal, you accurately evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum as it had not been planned well enough to ensure that pupils made the progress they were capable of. With support of the trust, you have taken bold steps to ensure that pupils are taught a curriculum that is stimulating and built upon high expectations. The introduction of this new curriculum to the current Year 7 is a welcome step. Pupils Year 8 and 9 also benefit from the principles of this new curriculum in their studies.
- The previous inspection identified the progress of the most able pupils as a concern. You have identified that staff and leaders do not have a secure understanding of the needs of this group of pupils and that expectations were not high enough in lessons. Leaders lack a sense of urgency and clarity in addressing the performance of the most able pupils. The most able pupils still do not make enough progress and leaders were not able to show inspectors a plan

for improvement in this area. You have begun a programme of staff training to initially raise awareness, but it is too early to demonstrate impact.

- Another area for improvement from the last inspection was to improve the attendance of pupils from a disadvantaged background. Overall attendance has declined during the last three years and continues to do so. The numbers of pupils who are persistently absent has significantly increased over the same period. The attendance of pupils from a disadvantaged background remains lower than that of their peers. Leaders are working hard to halt this decline, but they acknowledge that their efforts are yet to impact on the proportion of pupils who attend school regularly. It is important that this area is addressed and the decline is rectified. Improving pupils' attendance and reducing their persistent absence remains a priority for the school.
- Inspectors visited English lessons, as the outcomes for English were identified as a concern. The quality of teaching we saw encouraged pupils to progress well. They were engaged in interesting activities that inspired them to use a variety of skills. The department is heavily supported by the Inspiration Trust and this has led to teachers planning and evaluating their lessons well. The outcomes in English are not yet strong enough to ensure that more pupils are able to move onto appropriate courses in their next stage of education.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they take effective action to improve the regular attendance of all pupils and reduce persistent absence
- the curriculum is delivered with enough challenge so that all pupils make as much progress as they can, especially the most able and those from a disadvantaged background
- outcomes in GCSE examinations, especially in English, improve
- the overall effectiveness of the 16 to 19 study programmes improves.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Norfolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Diana Osagie
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, members of your senior team and middle leaders. The lead inspector met with governors and the CEO of the Inspiration Trust. Together with your leaders, inspectors visited classes across the school. We considered 47 responses by staff to Ofsted's online survey. We took account of 58 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 41 free-text comments. Inspectors spoke formally and informally with pupils and reviewed 41 responses by pupils to Ofsted's online survey and one email. We looked at documents relating to the school's work, including the school's self-evaluation, development plan and safeguarding records.