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Mr Shane Ierston
Principal
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Dear Mr Ierston

Short inspection of King's Leadership Academy Warrington

Following my visit to the school on 15 November 2018 with Nell Banfield, 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 January 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

High-quality leadership at all levels means that the school is in an even stronger position now than at the time of the previous inspection. You are very ably assisted by an impressive team of senior leaders. Members of this team work collaboratively to realise the very clear vision for the school. The ethos of the school is embodied in its specialism, 'character through the application of leadership'. This culture imbues all aspects of school life.

You have extremely high expectations of and for all your pupils. The curriculum and quality of teaching enables pupils to make excellent progress and attain high standards during their time at King's.

The responses to the staff online questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive. Staff particularly value the way that you and other leaders consider their work-life balance. They speak very highly of the positive impact that pupils' excellent behaviour has on their practice. This view is summed up in one teacher's comment:

'The systems in place ensure that we have students that want to learn and are prepared to learn. There is no need to firefight. Students allow us to teach.'

Pupils told us that they appreciate not having their learning disrupted by poor behaviour. In discussion with one of us, a mixed-age group of 14 pupils explained how they could see that the school's very high standards and expectations were beneficial to them and helped them to succeed. However, many of this group felt that the expectations of them in terms of behaviour and work load were too high. The majority of the 330 responses to the pupils' online survey were positive, but a small proportion said that they did not enjoy school and their learning.

Responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, indicate that parents and carers are generally very positive about the school. Many of those who responded to the free-text section of the questionnaire spoke of how pleased they are with the high standard of education that their children are receiving at the school. A small number expressed some concern about the quality of communication with leaders.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to ensure that pupils who are less able or with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) were given more help with reading, spelling and writing in lessons. The actions that you have taken in response to this have enabled these groups of pupils to achieve at a high level.

At the time of the previous inspection, the new members of the governing body were encouraged to challenge senior leaders in more detail about achievement. The governing body is now an established group that understands how to do this very effectively.

Safeguarding is effective.

You ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding throughout the school. The high-quality training that staff receive means that they are well placed to spot any signs of pupils being potentially at risk.

Leaders take a range of effective steps to ensure that pupils understand how to keep themselves safe. For example, they invite relevant external speakers into school to talk to pupils. You and your staff know your pupils well, which means that you can provide personalised and timely support when required.

All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, including protocols and practices for record-keeping. Any safeguarding concerns are handled very well by staff in school. Systems to ensure that only suitable people are recruited to work with pupils in the school are secure.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry for this inspection was to look at how leaders support low-prior-attaining pupils and those with SEND to make strong progress. You explained the range of support that they provide for these groups of pupils,

which starts when they make their transition from primary school. You understand how important it is for pupils to have strong literacy skills in order to succeed across the curriculum. Therefore, you ensure that there is a strong focus on developing the literacy skills of these groups of pupils during Years 7 and 8. Teachers have the same high expectations of what these pupils can achieve as they have of all other pupils. Staff use a range of strategies, such as scaffolding the learning, so that these pupils can respond to the school's challenging curriculum and achieve well. The success of this approach can be seen in the provisional published performance figures for 2018. These figures indicate that low-prior-attaining pupils made outstanding progress and that the attainment of those pupils with SEND was higher than the national average for all pupils.

- During the inspection, I was interested to investigate the link between your innovative curriculum and the strong progress that all pupils make. It is clear from my discussions with you and other senior leaders that the decisions that you have made about the curriculum are at the heart of pupils' successful outcomes. You have a clear rationale, not just about what the curriculum includes, but also about how the learning is sequenced. Teaching is divided into five 'learning cycles' throughout the year. The five-week block of taught content is followed by an assessment week. The final element of the cycle is 'gap week'. You explained that this is where 'failure is celebrated as a way to learn'. Teachers use this week to focus on pupils' gaps in understanding in a very personalised way. The way that you have designed and implemented your curriculum enables pupils to excel across a range of academic and creative subjects.
- The unvalidated published performance figures for 2018 demonstrate the impact of your curriculum intent and implementation. In 2018, Year 11 pupils, including those who were disadvantaged, made very strong progress that was well above the national average. Nevertheless, this does not mean that you have rested on your laurels. Leaders have honed the curriculum further in Years 7 and 8, with a greater focus on developing pupils' rich knowledge and vocabulary.
- My final line of enquiry related to governance. I was interested to find out what part governors play in bringing about the very strong outcomes for pupils. The governing body is now an established group of individuals who have the necessary skills and qualities to carry out their roles effectively. A clear scheme of delegation means that this group works collaboratively with the trust and chief executive officer to provide the right amount of support and challenge to leaders in school. Particularly impressive is the systematic way in which governors go about challenging leaders. They focus in depth on specific areas, gathering their own evidence and producing a report with recommendations for future action. They then continue to monitor and evaluate leaders' response to these recommendations. For example, it is as a result of one such challenge that leaders have broadened the type of qualifications that are offered at key stage 4, with a view to continuing these into key stage 5 and increasing the number of students who stay on into the sixth form.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they are mindful of the way that all pupils feel about the school's very high expectations.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We met with you and other senior leaders. One of us also met with the special educational needs coordinator. I met with three members of the governing body, including the chair. I also spoke on the phone with the chief executive officer. We met formally with two groups of pupils and talked informally with others in lessons and during morning break. Accompanied by senior leaders, we observed teaching and learning across the school. Together with senior leaders, we scrutinised the work of a small group of pupils. I examined your self-evaluation document and school development plan. I also undertook a review of the school's website. As part of the inspection, we considered the 144 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, including the 39 free-text comments. We also considered the 34 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for staff and 330 responses to the online questionnaire for pupils.