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Mr Mat Hunter
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hunter

Short inspection of Icknield Community College

Following my visit to the school on 12 March 2019 with Yasmin Maskatiya, 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 March 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. As an outward-looking, dynamic and thoughtful leader, you have instigated a number of far-reaching and successful changes over the last few years. You are not complacent and, although the school is oversubscribed, you have strong plans to develop the school further. Staff are very positive about the support and direction provided by you and the senior leadership team. You have successfully collaborated with the headteachers of four local schools to set up the Acer multi-academy trust (MAT), to which your school belongs. You have also developed the curriculum so that it provides pupils with rich experiences across a range of subjects, as well as a strong academic grounding. You have implemented a tight and carefully considered approach to assessment that enables leaders at all levels to monitor pupils' achievement closely. Of note is the positive impact of the designated leader's relentless emphasis on improving pupils' attendance, which has risen this academic year in comparison to last.

In some subjects, particularly in mathematics, and for some groups of pupils, GCSE outcomes in 2018 were not as strong as you had hoped. You have introduced a number of judiciously chosen new approaches to strengthen the progress that pupils make from their starting points. However, in some classes, notably in key stage 3, teaching does not consistently ensure that pupils acquire the subject-specific knowledge and skills intended. As a result, pupils in these classes do not always work as purposefully and independently as they do in other classes in the school, where practice is stronger.

You and your leaders have dedicatedly provided educational experiences of substance and worth for your pupils. They told inspectors how much they valued these experiences. Pupils also commented to inspectors that the best thing about the school was 'the way that teachers give you additional help'. You make sure that pupils access high-quality, extra-curricular opportunities, which enable them to pursue their passions and interests, such as the drama production of 'Bugsy Malone' running next week. There are also plenty of opportunities for pupils to take on leadership roles, including the roles of head boy and head girl. Comments made by parents on free-text highlighted the school's care for pupils and its focus on their well-being. One parent, echoing the views of many, remarked, 'I love this school. It is small and nurturing. All the staff are very friendly and approachable. If I have ever had any issues and contacted a member of staff they have responded to my concerns.' The overwhelming majority of parents who completed the Parent View survey indicated that they would recommend the school to others.

You and your staff have created a positive environment where pupils treat staff respectfully and relationships between pupils are largely harmonious. Staff told inspectors how much they enjoy working at the school. Staff also feel that they benefit from the collegiate approach. This approach is typified by the range of opportunities that teaching staff can access to collaborate with their colleagues in this school and across the MAT. Teaching staff are adamant that, although leaders nurture them and develop their professional expertise, they are stringently held to account. They cite the tight systems that you have set up for monitoring pupils' learning, progress and attendance, noting how they provide both support and challenge.

You have successfully implemented the main areas for development from the previous inspection report. In particular, you have developed the way that teaching supports pupils with their literacy needs and improved the quality of teaching in the subject areas specified. You, your leaders and the local governing board know the school's strengths and areas for development very well. You have taken a bespoke and carefully considered approach when establishing lines of accountability in the newly formed MAT. All the schools within the MAT are equal partners but, nevertheless, maintain their individuality. The local governing board has a detailed understanding of the effectiveness of the school, including how results in national tests compare to all schools nationally.

Safeguarding is effective.

There are carefully considered systems and processes in place to ensure that pupils are kept safe. These processes and systems are fit for purpose and are regularly checked by a member of the local governing board with safeguarding expertise. All concerns raised by staff are reviewed by the 'student services team', which includes the designated safeguarding lead. This approach enables concerns to be dealt with efficiently and support to be deployed appropriately. The school has developed a strong team of staff who can provide different types of support for pupils and their families on a range of issues. The strong internal support provided has also assisted

some pupils to improve their attendance. When necessary, concerns are referred to the local authority's welfare services. The designated lead carefully monitors the way in which referrals are followed up by the local authority and has on occasion questioned actions taken by the authority.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on key aspects of the school's work, one of which was the role of leaders and governors and whether their expectations are high enough. There is strong evidence that MAT leaders, including trustees, hold the school stringently to account. The trust's executive group (TEG), consisting of the headteachers from all the MAT schools, provides effective support and challenge. Strong collaboration between the headteachers in the MAT has assisted you in moving this school forward. Members of the TEG have conducted subject reviews in individual schools as well as reviewing aspects of MAT-wide provision. Trustees make good use of TEG audits and reviews when holding school leaders to account. They also carefully scrutinise the impact and role of the TEG group. However, there is currently no formal mechanism for the local governing board's in-depth oversight of the school's work to feed into trust-wide lines of accountability. Trustees are aware of this shortcoming and are wisely setting up a MAT-wide governance group which will carry out this function.
- The subject reviews and monitoring work undertaken by the TEG have been focused on the right areas. Reports from reviews and monitoring undertaken by the TEG show that its members set the bar sufficiently high. The recent TEG review of the mathematics department in your school was appropriately focused on how the curriculum enables pupils to master mathematical topics. It provided the school with detailed recommendations as to next steps, which are currently guiding your work in this area. For example, it suggested ways of developing the teaching of mathematical reasoning.
- I scrutinised the school's approach to assessment as part of our focus on the curriculum and how assessment assists you in holding leaders to account. You have developed assessment practice over time and methods have been carefully thought through. Assessment helpfully focuses on measuring pupils' acquisition of key knowledge and skills delivered through different strands of each subject's curriculum. As a consequence, information from assessment supports teachers' planning well. Assessment approaches enable teachers to identify precisely where pupils have gaps in their learning and knowledge. Senior leaders ensure that information from assessments is collated so that it is easier for teachers and subject leaders to identify trends and patterns. Senior leaders use this information well to hold subject leaders to account in regular, formal meetings. They also use it to identify improvement priorities for subjects. As a result, planned next steps are subject-specific but also focus on key groups of pupils, such as disadvantaged pupils. The headteacher carefully checks and reviews all departmental plans and, on occasion, requests changes are made to secure more far-reaching improvements.
- Subject leaders also regularly analyse collated assessment information in the meetings they hold with the teachers in their department. These meetings are

sharply focused on identifying and improving those aspects of the curriculum which pupils' assessments indicate need to be strengthened. In addition, subject leaders quality assure the bespoke plans developed by class teachers, known as '4I' plans. These plans are designed to raise the achievement of groups of pupils or of individual pupils who have gaps in their learning. Teachers make good use of their subject knowledge and their familiarity with individual pupils when creating these plans. Heads of year known as progress managers also make sure that individual pupils who are underachieving across a range of subjects receive tailor-made support.

- I also gathered evidence on how effectively the curriculum is implemented across the school. I explored how well you are supporting pupils in achieving highly in the suite of GCSE qualifications known as the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). The EBacc includes English literature, English language, science, an ancient/modern language, history or geography and mathematics. You are aware that pupils' achievement in mathematics dipped in 2018 GCSE examinations and are determined that pupils' outcomes will be better in 2019. You and your leaders have made a number of changes to the way that you teach mathematics, which are currently being piloted. You have also appointed new mathematics teachers, who will take up their posts in September. You do not believe in quick fixes and the new approaches you have put in place are designed to lead to sustainable improvements. You are aware that some planned improvements are not fully embedded.
- Attainment in languages is high but the take-up of language GCSEs has been low, compared with history or geography GCSEs. This has meant that the proportion of pupils achieving the EBacc was well below the national average in 2018. While maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum, which supports pupils in fulfilling their academic potential, you have sought to increase the uptake of GCSE languages. For instance, this academic year, in addition to two French GCSE classes, you are running a Spanish GCSE class. This class is much smaller than the average-sized GCSE class. The teaching of languages in key stage 3 has improved and teachers are enthusiastic about their subject. However, despite your efforts, the take-up of languages at GCSE level remains too low. In consultation with your leaders and governors, you are currently considering what further changes might be made to boost the uptake of languages in the future.
- I reviewed how you have developed teaching, so that pupils make strong progress from their starting points. You have introduced some school-wide approaches as well as a number of subject-specific strategies. One whole-school priority is enhancing pupils' commitment to their own learning, including independent learning. I saw this working well in some classes. For example, in English, Year 10 pupils were reviewing the meaning of some complex words that the teacher had introduced previously and only used the dictionary for words that they did not recall, confidently relying on the definitions they had memorised for the other words. However, in a small number of classes, most notably in key stage 3, teaching is not sufficiently focused on enabling pupils to acquire a strong body of subject-specific knowledge and skills. In these classes, pupils are not fully engaged in their learning.

- As part of the inspection, I scrutinised pupils' behaviour and attendance. The responsible leader has implemented a number of successful approaches to improving attendance. Figures show that attendance has improved by 1%, compared with the same period last academic year. You have also successfully reduced persistent absence for key groups of pupils, such as disadvantaged pupils.
- Your staff know the pupils very well. You are highly attuned to the safeguarding issues that are most relevant to the school's context. For example, you have tight processes in place to make sure that important safeguarding information is passed on to the next school for pupils who leave in the middle of the school year. You are currently using your strong contextual knowledge of local safeguarding issues to develop the citizenship curriculum, working alongside external experts. You are rightly focused on ensuring that the curriculum enables pupils to access information about the most prevalent risks that they face.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all teaching becomes as effective as the best practice seen in the school so pupils acquire strong subject-specific knowledge and skills, further enhancing their commitment to learning.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing body, the chair of the board of trustees and the chief accounting officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Oxfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we checked safeguarding arrangements, including the records of recruitment checks, policies and procedures. We reviewed a range of information, which included MAT audits, and information about pupils' progress and information about assessment systems. Accompanied by either you or a senior member of staff, inspectors observed pupils' learning in both key stages, in a range of subjects, including those subjects that make up the Ebacc qualification. Accompanied by several school leaders, inspectors also scrutinised a sample of pupils' books. Meetings were held separately with the headteacher and senior leaders, a group of subject leaders, a group of staff, the designated safeguarding lead, leaders responsible for behaviour and attendance, and a group of pupils. Inspectors also met with the chair of the local governing board, the chair of trustees

and the chief operating officer for the MAT. Inspectors also reviewed 100 responses to Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, Parent View, including 29 free-text comments, 54 responses to the staff survey and 94 replies to the pupil survey.