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Mrs Gemma Ackred  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Ackred

### **Short inspection of St Thomas More High School**

Following my visit to the school on 24 April 2018 with Carole Herman, 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 February 2015.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

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

Most pupils at this school talk proudly about being a 'Tommy More boy'. They are mindful of the importance of being part of the 'family' community where they build positive relationships with one another and with the staff. Behaviour is generally good in the school. A number of pupils spoke to inspectors about how well staff support them to improve their behaviour. During the five years that most pupils spend at the school, they are supported to become active, mature, articulate and responsible young citizens in society; that is the measure of a 'Tommy More' boy.

Most pupils make good progress from their starting points in a number of subjects. The outcomes in GCSE mathematics are of particular note, where pupils in Year 11 have made significantly better progress than other pupils nationally for two consecutive years. Year 11 pupils also made strong progress in humanities and science in 2017. The school's focus on driving up standards in English also secured a significant improvement in the performance of pupils in both English language and English literature. Those few pupils who needed support to catch up made exceptional progress in English in 2017.

The mixed-gender sixth form, which was judged to require improvement in the 2015 inspection, has improved significantly. Pupils' progress in 2017 was significantly above the national average. Leaders have used a thorough understanding of national guidance on 16 to 19 study programmes to ensure that

all students, including girls who join the sixth form from other schools, are well supported emotionally, socially and academically to meet the aims of the programme. Although short inspections cannot change judgements from the previous inspection, current evidence indicates that the sixth form is now a real strength in the school's good overall provision.

You lead with passion and insight that ensure that the school continues to improve. You know your pupils well, and refuse to resort to any 'quick fixes', determined that all changes should be meaningful and sustained. Together with your astute deputy headteacher, you have created strong and diligent senior and middle leadership teams. You have been well supported by the Diocese of Brentwood in becoming the lead school in the new Assisi Multi-Academy Trust, which has recently been granted approval to sponsor other academies.

The leadership team and governors are continuously reflective about aspects of the school's work that are not yet fully effective. You have identified that you are not having enough impact on the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, most notably those from more positive starting points. Equally, while you have focused on the key stage 4 curriculum, your work on the key stage 3 curriculum is still in its infancy. As a result, this curriculum is not ensuring that pupils who enter with strong starting points make exceptional progress during their time in key stage 3.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The checks that you make before you recruit staff are appropriate and in line with statutory guidance. Your team ensures that staff are well trained in identifying and reporting any concerns about the well-being of pupils. Written records are kept meticulously, and act as an effective chronology of the actions taken by you and others in keeping pupils safe over time. Governors make appropriate checks on these statutory requirements.

Leaders have created an ethos and culture of safety. Almost all pupils who completed Ofsted's pupil survey, and all pupils spoken to throughout the inspection, stated that they feel safe. Leaders are particularly adept at staying abreast of the safeguarding issues in the local community. They use this understanding to make appropriate referrals to national, as well as local, agencies. You persist in challenging external agencies where you have ongoing or urgent concerns about the welfare of your pupils.

As part of the inspection, we particularly reviewed bullying, as the school's records show that there are low numbers of reported incidents. Most pupils were adamant that bullying and poor behaviour are rare in the school. Many pupils commented effusively on how staff and pupils uphold the school's community spirit. Pupils appreciate the importance and value of different lifestyles, faiths and backgrounds. Despite these clear strengths, you and the team are constantly looking for ways to improve pupils' ability to articulate their feelings when, on occasion, and often inadvertently, pupils cause offence to one another.

## Inspection findings

- Our first line of enquiry was to review the provision and progress of disadvantaged pupils. This is because Year 11 disadvantaged pupils in 2017 did not make enough progress from their starting points, notably those from middle- and higher prior attaining starting points.
- Leaders and governors have implemented a series of new pilots and strategies this year to raise standards for disadvantaged pupils in all year groups. In particular, the support for the pastoral needs of some of the most vulnerable disadvantaged pupils is effective.
- However, we identified that the strategies to raise academic standards are not yet precise enough in identifying why some pupils underachieve. Moreover, the additional funding is not being evaluated sharply against pupils' higher starting points when they arrive in the school. Consequently, some staff do not have high enough expectations about what the most able pupils should be achieving in key stage 3.
- Our second line of enquiry was to review how well the curriculum meets the needs of the significant number of higher attaining pupils who arrive at the school every year. We were particularly interested in reviewing the provision in key stage 3 because the information available on the school's website was significantly less detailed than that available for key stage 4.
- The strengths already highlighted in the Year 11 outcomes in 2017 are also apparent in the provision for current key stage 4 pupils. The curriculum has been well thought out in this key stage. Pupils receive a breadth of opportunity, and are challenged to achieve high standards. Pupils are engaged and challenged, and create high-quality work that shows that they remember what they learn over time.
- However, the proportion of pupils achieving the full English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was low in 2017. This continues to be affected, to some degree, by significant difficulties you face in developing modern foreign languages provision in the school. While languages are on offer to pupils, challenges to recruiting and retaining staff have severely affected consistency in teaching and learning for pupils in key stage 3. This is why many pupils routinely decide not to study the subject at GCSE level.
- When reviewing the key stage 3 curriculum and learning in lessons, we identified that there is not always sufficient emphasis on the high starting points of many pupils. We discussed that this is a potential reason why the stronger provision in key stage 4 is not leading to the highest grades for some of these pupils by the end of Year 11. This is especially the case for those pupils who are from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Pupils access a well-thought-out programme of study that enables them to make appropriate decisions for their options at key stage 4. However, a few pupils said in the pupil survey that they would like more specific support tailored to their individual abilities and interests.

- There is a wide-ranging extra-curricular programme, including trips, visits and charity work. Lots of pupils take part in before- and after-school clubs, as well as lunchtime activities. For example, a large number of pupils actively take part in the extensive and ever-growing sports programme.
- Our final line of enquiry was to review the sixth form. As already identified, this is a real strength in the school's provision. Students, including girls who joined the school in Year 12, are incredibly positive about their experience, which is of a very high quality, and continuing to improve.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle- and higher prior attaining disadvantaged pupils make stronger progress from their starting points, and that additional funding supports these pupils' needs more precisely
- they further develop the key stage 3 curriculum and options guidance, so that it builds more securely on the prior attainment of pupils, especially but not exclusively encouraging more pupils to study languages into key stage 4.

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

Yours sincerely

Kim Pigram  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, we met with you, the deputy headteacher and senior leaders. We invited a representative from the Diocese of Brentwood to attend our team meeting. Members of the governing body attended a number of meetings throughout the day. Inspectors visited an array of lessons across key stages 3, 4 and 5. We were accompanied by members of the senior leadership team. We looked at pupils' work while we were in those lessons. We took account of 127 pupil responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire, 97 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents and carers, Parent View, and 42 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. We reviewed a range of school documentation, including information related to safeguarding and pupils' progress.