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Dear Mr Conway

Short inspection of Notley High School and Braintree Sixth Form

Following my visit to the school on 17 March 2016 accompanied by Jennifer Carpenter and Paul Copping, 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 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. Senior leaders work well together and have taken appropriate actions to address the decline in achievement in 2013. As a result, outcomes have improved and continue to improve. Pupils' progress is good across many subjects.

Leadership is strong at Notley High School and Braintree Sixth Form. There is a clear sense of cohesion and a shared desire to improve the school further. Since you joined the school in September 2015, you have quickly shared your vision, by meeting with each member of staff and each Year 11 pupil. You have set out your stall clearly and not shied away from challenging practice that is not good enough. Your approachable and decisive leadership is welcomed by very many staff and pupils. You have successfully added to the momentum of improvements that were already underway. Senior leaders informed inspectors that they are clearly held to account and feel empowered to make the changes you have correctly identified that are needed to achieve your ambition of making the school outstanding.

Middle leaders rightly have confidence in you and your senior team, sharing your high expectations. Governors are supporting you well. For example, in allocating significant resources so that you can reduce the number of temporary teachers required by the school in certain subjects; something that has been a cause of frustration to parents and pupils.

Pupils' personal development and welfare is well-provided-for. The very large majority of parents agree. Pastoral leadership is a strength of the school. Pupils speak warmly about the work of the highly effective year leaders in helping them to further improve their behaviour and improve their self-esteem. Pupils value the school's weekly personal development time (PDT) sessions. In these sessions, pupils learn about topics such as finance, careers, health and well-being. Pupils and learners informed inspectors that they feel very well prepared for the next stage of their education. One pupil commented, 'They are giving us the tools we need to do well in later life,' while another commented, 'We develop the right skills and teachers give us the opportunity to use them.' Other pupils echoed these sentiments over the course of the inspection.

You have raised expectations of how pupils should behave. Most pupils have responded well to this. Behaviour in lessons and around the school site is generally very positive. Pupils are confident, inquisitive and mix well together. Evidence gleaned on inspection indicates that relationships are a strength of the school. Pupils explained that this was typical of their overall experience. They explained that where issues do occur, adults address them swiftly and effectively. You acknowledge that there is work being done with a very small group of pupils who are taking too long to improve their behaviour.

Teachers' well-planned learning activities enable many pupils to make good progress. Evidence seen in lessons and pupils' work demonstrates that teachers are applying the school's feedback policy consistently. The most-able pupils explained that they would welcome even greater challenge in some subjects – something you acknowledge and are addressing. Evidence seen indicates that this is having an impact, for example in science where the number of A*/A grades is rising.

Post-16 learners are proud of their very well organised sixth form. They know that their progress and attendance is carefully tracked and appreciate the fact that any issues are quickly followed up. Learners' behaviour is excellent and they are effectively prepared for the next stage of their education. They very much appreciate the care provided through the tutorial programme. They explained that in the event of having any concerns, 'you could go to any of your teachers'.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders, including governors, have made sure that safeguarding policies and practice are robust and meet current statutory requirements. Records are carefully maintained and kept up to date. Adults receive appropriate training and know what to do if they have any concerns. Pupils feel safe. They are able to explain the strategies that they use to ensure that they stay safe when using the internet. Importantly, pupils know why this level of caution is important. Case studies seen in school indicate that where concerns arise, leaders are tenacious in ensuring that the correct support is put in place. Leaders work effectively with a range of external agencies to ensure that pupils receive the support that they need. The large majority of parents agree that their children are safe at Notley High School and Braintree Sixth Form.

Inspection findings

- Since the last inspection, there have been significant changes in the leadership and management of the school. A new Chair of the Governing Body, new headteacher and new school business manager are now in post. As a consequence, there has been an acceleration in the rate of improvement being made across the school. School leaders, including governors, have a precise understanding of the quality of education in the school. Your school improvement plan is closely linked to your self-evaluation document and identifies the correct priorities for the school.
- The governing body carries out its role very effectively and sets a clear strategic direction for the school. Governors make sure that they know about the quality of education provided by the school. They do not rely solely on the comprehensive reports from senior leaders. Governors are regular visitors to school and also take account of information provided by organisations such as the local authority. Members of the governing body are prepared to challenge you and your senior leaders where they have concerns. Similarly, governors are supporting you as you make improvements to the school.
- Leaders have addressed the issues raised in the last inspection report. Pupils are set ambitious targets for achievement and are increasingly aware of the progress that they are making toward these targets. Teachers' skilful use of questioning helps pupils to gain a deeper understanding of the subjects that they are studying. For example, this was observed in a Year 12 history lesson where the teachers probing questioning enabled learners to draw on a wide range of evidence in developing their hypotheses about appeasement in 1938.
- Many of your middle leaders are effective in their work. They work closely together to monitor the progress of pupils and learners across the school. Middle leaders are held to account well by their line managers. These leaders appreciate the fact that their views are taken into account when school improvement decisions are made. They explained that issues that they raise are addressed swiftly by you and your senior team.
- Leaders took successful action when outcomes declined after the previous inspection. As a result, achievement rose in 2014 and 2015. Attainment was very high in English literature, religious studies and statistics. Evidence seen on inspection confirms that these improvements have been maintained and are accelerating in many subjects, including English and mathematics. For example, in English many pupils have already achieved a C grade in their IGCSE examination. Your accurate assessment information and evidence seen in pupils' books demonstrates that pupils in Key Stage 3 are making good progress. Many are on track to meet their demanding target grades.
- The progress that disadvantaged pupils make has improved markedly in the past two years. Pupils currently in school are making good progress, in many cases the same or better than their peers. This is because of your skilful use of pupil premium funding. For example, you are rightly proud of the highly effective literacy support that these pupils receive. This has led to a significant increase in their reading ages.

- You recognise that more needs to be done to enable the most-able pupils to consistently achieve their potential. Not enough of these pupils attained a GCSE A* or A grade across all subjects in 2015. Pupils explained to inspectors that they would welcome greater challenge in some of their subjects. Where this challenge is evident, for example in chemistry and biology, these pupils show you what they are capable of achieving.
- You and your leaders are determined to provide as broad an education as you can. Pupils appreciate the wide range of activities on offer. For example, one pupil explained that this is a 'school of opportunities' and his peers agreed. These include visits to Spain, Germany and Poland as well as clubs in the arts, languages, music and sport. By providing transport home for pupils after these clubs each Wednesday, you are doing your best to ensure equality of opportunity in taking part in these activities.
- Pupils' attendance has improved since the last inspection. This is due to the careful monitoring and effective action taken by school leaders. You can point to several pupils whose attendance had previously been poor and has improved markedly as a result of actions taken by school leaders. This trend of improvement is continuing; however, it is not as marked for disadvantaged pupils. Equally, attendance in the sixth form is not improving as quickly as it is in the rest of the school.
- You have made clear your high expectations of pupils' behaviour. You and your senior leaders maintain a high profile around the school site and model the calm, friendly approach that you expect of others. This is contributing to the warm, welcoming feel that is evident in the school. Very many pupils are responding well to this and their behaviour is good. A small minority are taking longer to adapt to these raised expectations. Nonetheless, the number of incidents that result in an exclusion is reducing and has halved this year.
- School leaders have taken effective action to ensure that pupils who have special educational needs or disability are well-cared-for. These pupils explained that they feel well supported as one pupil commented, teachers 'make you realise that you can do the work'. Evidence seen in pupils' work confirms that they make good progress across a range of subjects.
- Braintree Sixth form is well-led and provides good-quality education. Learners make good progress because learning is carefully matched to their interests and capabilities. Lessons are characterised by excellent relationships and high expectations of what learners can achieve. A scrutiny of work clearly demonstrated that learners are well organised and developing the skills and understanding to succeed in their examinations.
- Learners welcome the support that is offered to them. They value the termly folder checks, supervised study sessions and enrichment opportunities that are regular features of sixth form life. Learners know that their views are listened to by senior leaders. For example, leaders have made amendments to how feedback on learners' work is provided as a direct result of opinions expressed in a recent learner survey.
- Learners' personal development and welfare is very effectively provided for in Braintree Sixth Form. Learners develop a strong awareness of the world around them through activities such as charitable work, Model United Nations

and supporting younger pupils with their learning. Learners are well prepared for the next stage of their education as a result of the effective information, advice and guidance that they receive.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a higher percentage of the most-able pupils achieve A*/A grades across the wide range of subjects at GCSE
- the attendance of sixth form learners and disadvantaged pupils improves at a more rapid rate and is in line with that of other pupils nationally.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Essex County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, senior leaders, five middle leaders, four governors and three groups of pupils and learners. Inspectors also met a representative from the local authority. We observed pupils at work in a range of lessons. Several of these visits were carried out jointly with school leaders. Inspectors carried out a scrutiny of pupils' and learners' work in their books and folders. The inspection team reviewed a range of documents, including those relating to governance, safeguarding, attendance, behaviour, and school self-evaluation and planning. Inspectors considered 95 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. We also took account of the views expressed in the parents' free text responses received on the day of inspection.