



George Stephenson

High School

Dear Parent/Carer

As you are aware, our school was inspected by Ofsted earlier this month. The report has now been published and is on our website as well as Ofsted's. Although we are disappointed with the overall judgement, we are pleased that the inspectors found so many positives and I would like to thank you and your children for your ongoing support of our school.

The inspectors specifically asked me to thank the students and congratulate them on their attitudes, their behaviour and how they conducted themselves around school. They said lots of positive things about the relationships in our school, saying that good relationships and mutual respect exist between students and staff and that our young people are keen to learn and behave well. They also said that the behaviour of students is good, that they manage their conduct well, both inside and outside of the classroom and that they know what is expected of them. They also recognised that our students listen well and follow the instructions of their teachers. The report also states that our young people are confident when speaking with adults and they told inspectors that they feel safe in school and they have a good knowledge of how to stay safe. This is extremely important to us as a school, as I am sure it is to you as parents. Indeed, our safeguarding systems and procedures came out very strongly and they recognised that we are very effective in ensuring that staff understand that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. They concluded that there is a strong culture of safeguarding and said that parents and staff are very confident that students are well-cared for.

We are also very pleased that the inspectors acknowledged that there are good opportunities for students to learn about emotional well-being and our young people were clear that they are listened to and that their concerns are dealt with sensitively and effectively. The report also speaks very positively about the curriculum, recognising that it contributes well to our students' personal development, behaviour and welfare, and notes that we offer a rich programme of extra-curricular activities and that our students have a good understanding of what it means to be a good citizen in modern Britain. We were particularly pleased that they agreed that leaders and governors work very well with parents and carers, and they do acknowledge how very supportive our parents are of our school.

Although the overall outcome said that our school 'requires improvement', there were many good and better aspects contained within the report. Personal development, behaviour and welfare were all identified as real strengths of the school, with inspectors finding students to be polite and well behaved, both in and out of lessons. They said that our students are smart and take pride in their appearance, as well as their work, and are keen to do well. As we have always said, our students are a credit to us all and we continue to be immensely proud of them. Inspectors also stated that the care and guidance we offer our students is strong and that we prepare students well for life after school. As a result, the percentage of students going onto successful careers or further education is well above the national average.

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We were very pleased that they graded the Sixth Form provision as 'Good', stating that there have been year-on-year improvements, and that good systems, positive attitudes and good teaching have led to good progress.

They state that assessment, home learning and questioning are all used well to support good progress and that independent study time is used well. Enrichment and advice and guidance are all high quality, meaning that students are well-prepared for the next stage of their lives. I would like to point out that the teachers who, in Ofsted's views, do so well in the Sixth Form, also all teach throughout the school across Key Stage 3 and 4. They do not become better teachers just for their Sixth Form lessons.

The report also says that school leaders accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses in the school, and are already taking action to further improve outcomes at the end of Year 11. It also recognises that leaders have the support of staff and morale is high. We are therefore confident that we know what we need to do next and we are determined to ensure the school goes from strength to strength. Indeed, we would like to assure all parents and carers that all the staff and governors of George Stephenson High School are clear about what we need to do now. The students are very supportive of our school, the morale of staff remains high and we do not believe that this grading will last. We are already doing the things that are necessary to ensure that we eliminate any inconsistency or variation in the quality of the education we provide, and fully recognise that there is no room for any complacency. Many of the issues that were identified are those which we had already identified ourselves as our key priorities in our current improvement plans and we do not dispute the need to improve consistency in the areas that are identified.

Since our last inspection, expectations have been raised much higher through a number of revisions of the Ofsted procedures. This is a very different framework to the one we were inspected under in 2012 and a much greater emphasis has been placed on the school's Progress 8 figure rather than on attainment. Our students' attainment was actually strong this summer - on many indicators, the best it had been for a number of years - but our Progress 8 score was below average. However, in this new accountability system, based on averages and comparing all schools against each other regardless of context, there will always be half of the schools that are deemed to add value, and half that do not. We clearly do have high aspirations for our young people and work with them to make as much progress as possible. Interestingly, the day after our inspection, the Fischer Family Trust released our Progress 8 figure, taking into account the context of our school and comparing our students with similar students nationally, factoring in things like prior attainment, gender, month of birth, free school meals and special educational needs. On this measure, students at our school make at least expected progress. However, we do believe that our students should be making greater progress than they are and we do want to reassure you that changes are already in place in light of this.

The report does say that we accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses in the school and we are confident this is the case. It also recognises on a number of occasions that there are signs of recent improvement that have yet to come to fruition. We would like to share with you some of the things we are already doing and will do in response to the areas that the report says we need to do to improve further. English and Maths are double weighted in the Progress 8 figures to emphasise the importance of these two subjects and although our English results were good, our students did not achieve as well as we hoped in Maths and this had a large impact on our Progress 8 score. There have already been a number of changes in the Maths Department and we have had a detailed action plan in place since the start of this term. This includes a change in the management structure of Maths, a full review of the department, support from the Local Authority and other schools, the phased introduction of new schemes of work across the school and more personalised home learning. This is building on developments lower down the school that we introduced last year.

We know we have to improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better in the main school and we already have detailed plans in place to achieve this to ensure that the

expectations and level of challenge are high and questioning and assessment are used more effectively. We have been working with an organisation called Partners in Excellence (PiXL) and together with already more robust monitoring and evaluation, internal and external standardisation and support from the Local Authority and other schools, we are confident that this will reduce variability and inconsistency. The report does acknowledge a number of areas of strength in teaching, learning and assessment and our plan will ensure we will share and standardise the best practice to ensure teaching is consistently good or better. We had already changed the structure of our staff development programme from September and we are confident this will also help to address some of these issues.

We already have a detailed plan in place to increase attendance, another area we need to improve on. We are increasing the capacity in our Family Liaison and EWO team and are developing and improving our systems around things like first-day calling and ensuring absent students catch up on all missing work. We are also investigating other strategies including a wider use of fixed penalty notices. The Local Authority are providing support in this area. We will also commission as a matter of urgency, as suggested by Ofsted, a review of Governance and a Pupil Premium Review to give us further advice and support in ensuring that we make best use of the additional government funding for disadvantaged students.

We are completely focused on meeting the higher expectations of the new Ofsted framework, but, more importantly, on ensuring that all of our students achieve the very best possible results in all their subjects. We wanted to provide you with some context and to reassure you that we were already aware of what was required to improve and that changes are already in place in light of this. These changes will of course take time to come to fruition in terms of results later in the year and your continued support is also important here in ensuring students are positive, attend school, complete home learning on time and go to after school workshops and study sessions when required.

We hope that gives you an outline of some of the systems and strategies we were already introducing anyway, as well as an idea of how we are responding to this report. Your views are very important to us and we would like to invite you to a Parent Meeting on Wednesday 29th November from 6pm to 7pm in the main hall. This evening was originally planned to share information with you about our Key Stage 3 tracking and reporting system, and the changes in the grading system at Key Stage 4, but it will also give you the opportunity to hear directly from us about the recent Ofsted report, and to ask any questions you may have. Equally, you are welcome to contact us directly with any questions you may have: we are more than happy to speak to parents on an individual basis.

When you read the report, please can I encourage you to read the full text to see beyond the headline judgement. There are aspects of the inspection process that we could complain about and we could disagree with the outcome, but that would potentially waste time, energy and resources that we would rather use to ensure that all of our young people receive the quality education they deserve. There is a very fine line between a 'Good' school that needs to improve in some areas, and a school that 'requires improvement' and I very much hope that in reading the report, you will be reassured that we are a school that is very committed to providing the best possible educational experience for all our of students. The Ofsted report has only served to strengthen our resolve in tackling the issues and improving consistency across the school.

We look forward to your continued support.

Yours sincerely



Ian D Wilkinson
Headteacher



John Morley
Chair of Governors