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Mr Jonathan Hopkins
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Dear Mr Hopkins

Short inspection of Borden Grammar School

Following my visit to the school on 22 November 2016 with Lucy English HMI, 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 November 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have continued to raise standards and have tackled the areas for improvement well, with a clear focus on improving key aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. The school is improving because of the clear leadership that you and your senior leadership team provide. You, together with governors and the senior leadership team, have a very accurate understanding of the school and use this to identify strengths and priorities. You obtain some useful external validation of the quality of your work from the local authority and through working with other local schools.

There is a strong sense of community and pupils are rightly proud of their school and the opportunities it offers. Pupils confidently welcome visitors and are proud to explain their work, achievements and high aspirations. Good working relationships between staff and pupils ensure that pupils' pastoral and welfare needs are given careful support, alongside their academic requirements. As a consequence, pupils and their parents recognise how well staff care for pupils and understand their needs.

The quality of teaching and assessment is well led and managed. Most teachers plan stimulating lessons and use effective questioning to promote deeper thinking and reflection and ensure a swift pace of learning. Leaders are aware that in a minority of lessons teachers offer less challenge and the pace of learning is slower. Leaders ensure that systems are in place to support these teachers. Pupils know

their targets and what they have to do to make good progress. As a result, pupils make progress that is in line with, or better than, other pupils nationally in their GCSE examinations in nearly all subject areas.

Students in the sixth form feel particularly well supported by their teachers. Improved assessment and tracking systems are ensuring that a higher proportion of those currently in the school are making better progress in their A-level subjects than has been the case in the past. Leaders and governors recognise that subject leaders would benefit from experiencing best practice in the region and nationally so that they can further develop their subject expertise. This will enable the school to increase the proportion of students achieving the highest grades in their A levels still further.

Leaders ensure that a very effective package of intervention and support is offered to pupils eligible for the pupil premium. As a result, this group continue to make very strong progress from their starting points. Clear leadership and staff training ensure that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make strong progress because teachers and teaching assistants meet their needs well.

Attendance remains above the national average. However, you are aware that the attendance of some groups, including those eligible for the pupil premium and some pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, has been below that of their peers. You have successfully introduced a range of initiatives which are reducing these gaps in attendance for these groups.

Leaders and governors have responded well to the areas for improvement identified during the previous inspection. Senior leaders have implemented improvements to assessment and tracking systems, the quality of teachers' questioning and the consistency and effectiveness of the feedback given to pupils. As a result, more challenging teaching has led to better outcomes, particularly for the middle-attaining and vulnerable pupils. Staff morale is high. Recognising that more can be done to challenge the most able pupils and improve outcomes still further at A level, leaders' improvement planning prioritises clear actions to achieve this. Leaders and governors are aware that more focus needs to be given to ensure the same high standards of quality, depth and presentation of pupils' written work across the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, there is a culture of vigilance and records are detailed and of high quality. Governors are knowledgeable and work closely with staff to ensure that the work to keep pupils safe is given high priority and meets current requirements. There are clear, well-understood systems in place to manage safeguarding requirements. All staff have up-to-date training to an appropriate level and so they know what to do should they be worried about a pupil.

Pupils' attendance is above national average. You recognise that some groups, including disadvantaged pupils, had lower attendance rates in the past and the

school has worked closely with families to support improvements. Almost all pupils and parents report that pupils feel safe and well looked after at Borden Grammar School. Pupils told us that they know who to go to should they have any concerns and they trust that adults would be able to help them. As one of the pupils told an inspector during the inspection, 'It's like that trust game here; there's always someone to catch you.'

Inspection findings

- The school's effectiveness remains securely good. You give the school clear, purposeful leadership which is recognised by staff, governors and parents. You have recently restructured the senior leadership team, ensuring clearer lines of responsibility for academic and pastoral leadership. This has led to improved standards of achievement. You are now very ably supported by your senior team and governing body to bring about further improvements.
- Governors know the school well and offer insightful challenge to you and your senior team. Leaders provide governors with accurate information regarding pupils' and students' performance in key stage 4 and the sixth form. Governors analyse this to ask astute questions and support and challenge leaders well. Where they identify any underperformance, they insist on improvements, for example challenging leaders to improve standards in English at key stage 4 and to achieve greater consistency in outcomes at A level. However, as key stage 3 assessment systems are new, governors are less well informed and have not been able to challenge leaders as robustly on the performance of younger pupils.
- The school's self-evaluation and improvement planning are detailed and clearly identify priorities, actions, timescales and expected outcomes. As a result, leaders have responded well to the areas for improvement identified during the previous inspection. Improved assessment and tracking systems have underpinned improved teaching and learning, particularly in key stage 4.
- Outcomes at key stage 4 have improved over the past two years and the school's own assessment information shows that, overall, this improvement is continuing and all groups of pupils make strong progress. The school's investment in extra staffing and resources in English has led to improved standards at GCSE.
- In 2015, although A-level attainment was very high, the progress students made from their high starting points was well below national averages. However, standards have improved and current sixth formers are making better progress than in the past. Subject leaders have shared more accurate assessment and tracking systems, which have reduced the variation between subjects and improved outcomes. Senior leaders are aware that continued monitoring and further access to regional and national examples of best practice are needed to ensure that all subject leaders can challenge even greater proportions of the most able A-level students to achieve the very highest grades.
- The school makes very good use of additional funding to invest in extra lessons and a range of resources to support the small cohorts of disadvantaged pupils. As

a result, these pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, have made particularly strong progress from their starting points in recent years and current cohorts continue to do so.

- Focused leadership ensures that teachers are well informed with approaches and strategies to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Effective assessment and tracking systems together with timely interventions and support ensure that these pupils make good progress over time.
- Most teachers have high expectations and use their good subject knowledge to design stimulating lessons. They focus clearly on pupils' intended learning. In line with the school policy, teachers give helpful feedback and clear guidance to pupils, who use this to improve their work. A good example was seen in a Year 7 French lesson where the teacher made expectations very clear and pupils proudly sought to improve the depth and quality of their written work. Where this happens, pupils' books evidence how they make good progress in lessons and over time.
- Senior leaders regularly evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in lessons, which enables them to accurately identify strengths and priorities for improvement. Senior leaders have rightly prioritised challenging teachers to improve their questioning skills to increase pupils' progress. Inspectors witnessed teachers doing this across a range of subjects, encouraging pupils to confidently discuss and analyse difficult concepts in depth. For example, in a biology lesson, the teacher's probing questioning challenged Year 12 students to apply detailed subject-specific vocabulary and the concept of rates of reaction to an abstract model of gas exchange within tissues.
- Pupils' books evidence that in some lessons teachers do not insist on high enough expectations of presentation or written work, particularly in key stage 3. Where this occurs, inaccuracies in pupils' drawings, charts, graphs and written work limit their rate of progress, as they are not applying their full range of skills to deepen their understanding. More needs to be done to ensure that all pupils, particularly younger pupils and the most able, are routinely challenged to produce, refine and evaluate the very high-quality work that they are demonstrating elsewhere.
- Pupils are polite, friendly and continue to behave well in lessons and around the school site. They value their learning and play a full part in lessons. The pupils and sixth formers spoken to during the visit were keen to share how much they appreciate the support and help that their teachers give them. There are close working relationships between staff and pupils and between pupils of different ages. Sixth formers speak with pride about how they are able to support younger pupils by acting as subject prefects in mathematics and English lessons and support sessions.
- Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe and happy at the school and parents confirmed this view. A small minority of parents expressed concern about pupils'

behaviour in their replies to the Parent View survey, but the majority praised the pastoral care offered by the school. During this inspection, pupils' behaviour in lessons was good and conduct around the school site, although sometimes boisterous, was well managed. Pupils confirmed to us that they felt that incidents of bullying were very rare and they are confident that any issues that arise are swiftly resolved by staff when they do occur. Pupils and sixth formers told us with great pride how many of them act as 'Anti-bullying Ambassadors' to support their peers.

- There is an aspirational culture, and sixth formers act as excellent role models to younger pupils by playing an active role in the life of the school, becoming involved in the school council, as prefects, in sports teams and drama productions and through work experience opportunities. Students and their parents particularly value the careers guidance and extra support that teachers willingly offer. As one parent of a sixth-form student commented: 'I believe that the staff and leadership at this school are superb and have given my child the tools and skills that they will need in later life – a love of learning, the freedom to form their own ideas and the ability to listen to and respect others. Well done Borden Grammar School.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers continue to improve the level of challenge offered to the most able pupils across the school
- all pupils take a pride in their presentation, quality and depth of written work across the curriculum, particularly in key stage 3
- more students make good levels of progress in the sixth form to achieve the highest grades by making continued improvements to the tracking systems and sourcing external support for subject leaders where necessary.

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

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this visit, we looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including safeguarding arrangements, the progress pupils make in the sixth form and how effectively the school meets the needs of specific groups, including disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities

and the most able. Inspectors made visits to lessons to look at learning jointly with senior leaders. We spoke with pupils in lessons, looked at samples of their work in their books and inspectors met with pupils and sixth formers both formally and informally at lunchtime. Meetings were held with governors, senior leaders, middle leaders and I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. Documentary evidence, including policies, strategic planning documents and analyses of pupils' achievements, was evaluated. We also scrutinised documents relating to safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and records of governing body meetings. I also evaluated the responses of 111 parents to the online Parent View survey as well as responses to a staff questionnaire.