

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted

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Mr Mark Farmer
Headteacher
Moulsham High School
Brian Close
Chelmsford
Essex
CM2 9ES

Dear Mr Farmer

Short inspection of Moulsham High School

Following my visit with John Lucas, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 8 October 2015, 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 2011.

This school continues to be good.

Since the last inspection, your vision and ambition for the school have transformed it into a place where pupils flourish and gain the qualifications they need for the next stage of their education, training or the workplace. In addition to qualifications, you focus on nurturing pupil talent in sport, music and the arts, and on developing them into well-rounded young people with the essential personal qualities and skills needed for adulthood. This contributes greatly to the school's vibrancy, ethos and strong culture of achievement.

Your strong leadership has ensured that the drop in GCSE results in 2014 has been immediately rectified. This year, over 70% of Year 11 pupils attained five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. You, your senior leaders and governors have learnt from this dip in achievement. You have taken decisive action to prevent it happening again and to empower staff to make the further improvements needed to make the school outstanding.

Staffing has been strengthened, particularly in mathematics. Pupils' progress is checked much more often throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 to ensure that all of them remain on track to achieve their targets. You have appointed a new senior leader to raise the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, and to make sure that they attend regularly, engage fully in school life and receive the support they need to help them succeed. Pastoral staff and subject leaders are expected to know how well all pupils are progressing and intervene much more quickly when signs of underachievement emerge.

Pupils' behaviour and conduct are exceptional. We found them to be polite, well mannered and respectful. They stand up when adults enter classrooms, provide full answers when questioned by staff and wear their uniforms with pride. They are self-motivated and eager to learn, and manage their time for learning and for homework well. They readily accept responsibility as prefects, counsellors and sports captains, and enthuse about the wide range of enrichment activities held before, during and after school, especially sport, the orchestra and performing arts.

The last inspection asked you to make the quality of learning consistently good. Since then, you have placed improving teaching at the heart of the school's work. You have not backed away from making tough decisions when the quality of teaching has not been good enough and despite some difficulties in recruiting staff, teaching has gone from strength to strength. Pupils talked positively with us about the new staff who have joined the school recently, and what staff do in lessons to make learning stimulating and enjoyable.

You and your governors acknowledge that the quality of leadership of subjects varies, and that more needs to be done to improve this. Your inspirational leadership is building capacity to improve further by providing senior and middle leaders with additional training to help them raise their game and contribute fully to raising achievement. Staff feel both accountable and well supported, saying, 'the school's focus on "stretch and challenge" is not just for pupils, it's for us too'.

Staff at all levels, including senior and subject leaders, understand fully that their performance will be judged on the amount of progress made by their pupils. This clear accountability has improved pupils' progress, including those who are disabled or have special educational needs, and led to better results in GCSE examinations.

English leads the way in securing sustained, high achievement. Leaders' thorough understanding of examination requirements, routine assessment and inspired teaching encourage pupils to do their very best. Consequently, GCSE results are consistently high. Other subjects are catching up quickly; outcomes in history, food technology, religious studies and art are rising rapidly

Enhanced care and attention for pupils supported by the pupil premium (government funding to support those eligible for free school meals) are enabling them to make strong progress. Teachers know who these pupils are and what help they need. Gaps in their performance compared with others are closing rapidly in all year

groups. This year, the gap in progress made in mathematics by Year 11 pupils narrowed significantly and in English, it closed completely.

The last inspection also asked you to raise attendance. This is now above average. Pupils attend regularly because they thoroughly enjoy school, but also know that any absence is checked routinely and that they are expected to be in school, learning.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. Pupils are kept very safe. The school site is secure; entry and exit are supervised well by staff at the start and end of each day. The single central record is maintained thoroughly. Child protection procedures are firmly established and regular training updates staff on their role in protecting pupils. Governors make regular checks to test the robustness of these arrangements. All of the parents and carers who responded on Parent View agreed that their child is kept safe. Pupils' awareness of keeping safe online or when using mobiles is reinforced in assemblies and through the computing curriculum.

Inspection findings

- School leaders show a thorough understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Self-evaluation is accurate. Senior leaders and governors meet regularly to review the impact of their strategic plans, to gauge what went well and what else needs to be done to improve.
- Governors praise the changes you have brought about since the last inspection, recognising that your leadership 'sets the tone' for the school's increased effectiveness. They share your aspirations and assist you by overseeing the management of teachers' performance with suitable rigour. They support you and your staff fully, and challenge you when they feel things could be better.
- You know the effectiveness of your middle leaders. You can point to specific subjects where prompt, decisive action to remedy poor teaching and tackle weak leadership has led to improved outcomes for pupils. This has been done firmly but fairly, providing staff with additional support and clear timescales to increase their effectiveness.
- You have engendered in staff a corporate willingness to secure high-quality teaching across the school. Training is regular and programmes to improve the quality of teaching are well attended. The impact of this is monitored during your routine learning walks, scrutiny of pupils' work and half-termly reviews of their progress with teachers.

- The school prides itself on being inclusive and able to meet pupils' different interests, needs and abilities. Pupils in all key stages praise the pastoral care provided for them. They told us that 'if you need someone to talk to, there's always someone there'. They described the school as a very safe place to be, where bullying is not tolerated, disruption is rare and friendships thrive.
- Overall outcomes in GCSE examinations are usually above average. However, the upward trend in results seen since the last inspection came to a halt last year due largely to staff changes and absence, and because school leaders did not act promptly enough to prevent some pupils from underachieving. The remedial actions you and your senior leaders took to tackle this have had an immediate impact. GCSE outcomes this year are once again high. Not enough is being done by school leaders to ensure that the most-able pupils attain A* and A grades across all subjects. For example, this year a large proportion of Year 11 pupils attained higher grades in English, biology, art, food technology, media studies and religious education but did not in most other subjects. To tackle this, you have set older pupils much more challenging targets and created an 'accelerated' class of the most-able younger pupils in Key Stage 3 to ensure that they are fully challenged and prepared for learning later in Key Stage 4.
- All pupils are expected to make at least four levels of progress. Teachers mark pupils' work regularly using the 'blue boxes' to give clear advice on how to improve their work. In mathematics, pupils use personal whiteboards to display their answers. This enables teachers to check that all pupils understand what they are doing.
- At times, the agreed procedures for teaching and marking are not applied consistently, particularly by recently appointed staff who are less familiar with them. Learning walks often miss opportunities to reinforce your own expectations of pupils' presentation, and to check that teachers correct basic errors in pupils' spelling and grammar.
- Assessment is more thorough in English and mathematics than it is in some foundation subjects. For example, records show that pupils' progress in English and in mathematics is assessed every half-term to provide an accurate overview of how well they are doing, but assessment is much less frequent in design technology and French, and data do not illustrate clearly the rate of progress being made.
- Pupils understand diversity, human rights and the different cultures and beliefs they learn about in citizenship lessons. They are less aware of fundamental British values, mainly because important themes such as democracy, the rule of law and the risks of extremism are not taught explicitly to give them a deep understanding of these issues.

- Leadership of the sixth form has been strengthened to improve the monitoring of pupils' progress and welfare. Good relations and lessons that are suitably planned to engage sixth-form pupils enable them to make good progress. The expectations of pupils are much higher. They are told that 'a school day is a working day', so when they are not in lessons they should be studying independently. This has led to year-on-year improvements in results since the last inspection. This year, a higher proportion of pupils attained A* to B grades at A level compared with previous years.
- The sixth-form leader also makes regular checks on pupils' attendance, homework and personal study to ensure that they achieve what is expected of them. Pupils feel that form tutors provide good advice about lifestyle, keeping safe and opportunities to support the learning of younger pupils. They are unsure about the full meaning of fundamental British values and would welcome further learning about this.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- a higher percentage of pupils capable of attaining A* and A grades do so, across the full range of GCSE examinations
- those subjects where the quality of teaching and GCSE results are not as high as they could be pull their weight and contribute fully to enabling the school to become outstanding
- the curriculum and pastoral programme include discrete teaching of fundamental British values to give all pupils, including those in the sixth form, a full understanding of these issues.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, your senior leaders, a group of subject leaders, four governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the local authority and two groups of pupils. Together with senior leaders, we visited a range of subject areas to observe teaching and look at pupils' work. We reviewed school documents about safeguarding, including the single central record, attendance and behaviour records, and the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans. We considered the responses from parents on Parent View.