

Robert Blake Science College

Hamp Avenue, Bridgwater, Somerset TA6 6AW

Inspection dates	8–9 December 2015
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher's commitment and drive are making a real difference to the life chances of the young people who attend the school.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good. All staff benefit strongly from a wide range of training opportunities, and learn from each other.
- Accurate monitoring of the progress pupils make and the improved quality of teaching enable pupils to succeed regardless of their starting point, background or ability.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the site is good. Pupils are proud ambassadors for the school and create a warm and welcoming atmosphere within the school.
- Pupils' reading ability and confidence are improving. This is a result of a successful reading programme.
- The school's leaders know and care for all pupils well. A highly effective careers programme helps all pupils prepare effectively for life after school.
- Senior and subject leaders set high expectations for pupils. All staff share this commitment and belief in pupils' ability to succeed. They work well together to drive ambition and raise achievement for all pupils.
- Governors are effective. They understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school and challenge leaders well to secure improvements.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Not all pupils yet make consistently strong progress in all subjects.
- Not all pupils act fully on the feedback they get from teachers to improve their work. A small minority of teachers do not check this carefully enough.
- Some teachers' use of questioning does not fully challenge all pupils to think more deeply about their learning.
- Occasionally teachers do not consider carefully enough what pupils can and cannot do when planning lessons; this limits the progress pupils make.
- Not all teachers provide pupils with opportunities to develop their skills effectively for extended writing. As a consequence, some pupils do not demonstrate the understanding required to reach the highest grades in examinations.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise outcomes so that all pupils make consistently good or better progress by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use information on what pupils can and cannot do to provide work that suitably challenges them
 - use effective questioning to probe pupils' understanding and deepen their learning
 - provide pupils with opportunities to act on the feedback they are given to improve their learning
 - check pupils' learning during lessons and modify their teaching accordingly
 - provide students with opportunities to complete extended pieces of writing to develop their literacy skills so that they are better prepared for external examinations.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The headteacher is ambitious for all who work and learn at the school. He has a clear vision and relentless drive for further improvement which are evident throughout the school. All leaders have worked hard to ensure that the ethos of 'Aspire, Achieve, Celebrate' permeates the school. Staff, parents and pupils share the school's ethos; this collective belief is a real strength of the school.
- Changes to the leadership team since the previous inspection have strengthened the capacity to secure further improvements. As a result, a greater focus has been placed on ensuring that no pupil is left behind and that the needs of all pupils are met.
- Leaders have a clear understanding of the community they serve. Senior and middle leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths of the school, in addition to the challenges it faces. They are taking effective actions to develop the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. As a result, the quality of teaching and the progress that pupils make are now good.
- Staff are given good support to improve their teaching and make good use of an impressive range of training opportunities. One member of staff said, 'We are encouraged to be the best we can be.' This commitment is leading to continual improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- The 'learning lunch' attended by the majority of staff, and observed by one inspector, was extremely vibrant and provided an informal, but highly effective, means for staff to share messages about good teaching. These regular events are highly valued by staff.
- The headteacher ensures that all teachers are held firmly to account for the impact their teaching has on the progress pupils make. Where underperformance occurs, the headteacher takes decisive action to challenge teachers and to support them to improve their practice.
- The school offers a good range of appropriate subjects for students. Leaders regularly review the subjects they offer to ensure a close match to the needs, interests and ambitions of pupils. A careful process is used in Year 9 to ensure that all pupils follow the best courses for them. The school offers an extensive range of activities outside the curriculum. Pupils highly value these experiences; participation levels are high.
- The school develops pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding well. Pupils have a good understanding about what it means to be a citizen in modern Britain. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 talk with enthusiasm about being part of the school's parliament and their aspiration to be elected as the school's 'prime minister'.
- Careers guidance and support for pupils at the school are highly effective. Pupils are well informed from Year 8 onwards about the variety of options they have when leaving the school. The school's work with a wide range of employers and educational providers ensures that all pupils in Years 10 and 11 are fully informed about their post-16 options. Personalised support for pupils leads to their effective preparation for the next stage of their learning after school and beyond.
- The school has made effective use of external support. Leaders are proactive in drawing on this support to help monitor the improvements at the school. A recent visit from a national leader of education has helped leaders evaluate the impact of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who are behind on joining the school at the start of Year 7. As a result of this, the achievement of these pupils is improving.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders ensure that everybody fully understands their responsibilities for safeguarding across the school. Pupils feel very safe and staff are swift to act on any concerns, with well-kept records and appropriate actions taken.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governance has improved since the previous inspection. New members have broadened the skills of the governing body; more searching questions are now being asked to fully challenge leaders at the school.
 - As a result of a reorganisation of the governing body's committees, governors now have a much sharper focus on school improvement. They rigorously monitor the progress of different groups of pupils including those who are disadvantaged.
- Governors ensure that the arrangements for safeguarding are effective. They ensure that all training for staff is up to date so that all requirements are met.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teaching at the school is good. This is a result of a continual drive to raise expectations and improve the quality of the teaching. Most parents are pleased with the quality of the teaching their child receives.
- Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to plan and structure a range of good learning opportunities. Classrooms are vibrant spaces and teachers make good use of high-quality resources and specialist facilities to engage pupils and help them to make good progress.
- Pupils talk positively about the improvements in the quality of teaching; they say that lessons motivate them to be more ambitious for their future. Relationships between staff and pupils are a significant strength. The vast majority of pupils feel confident and are very eager to contribute their thoughts and ideas during lessons.
- Teachers have worked hard to improve the quality of their feedback to pupils on their work. Pupils value the feedback they receive and most respond well by taking actions to improve their work. In a Year 11 English lesson, pupils spoke positively about the improvement to their understanding in preparing for assessments as a result of the time they are given in lessons to respond to their teacher's feedback and redraft work. However, a minority of teachers do not always ensure that pupils act on the feedback they have been given.
- Information about pupils' achievement is gathered on a regular basis by senior leaders and used to set challenging targets for pupils. However, not all teachers make full use of this information when planning their teaching. Consequently, some teachers do not act quickly enough when pupils' learning starts to falter. A small number of teachers do not always use questioning well enough to check learning and challenge pupils to think more deeply about their learning.
- All staff help pupils well to develop their basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics from low starting points. Effective and regular support in reading, particularly for pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9, has a strong impact on improving pupils' confidence and ability in reading. Occasionally, teachers do not provide pupils with enough opportunities to write extended pieces of work to effectively develop their literacy skills in preparation for external examinations.
- Learning support assistants provide strong support for pupils. They work closely with teachers and use their specialist knowledge well to support learning effectively. Much success can be seen in mathematics with the good development of pupils' numeracy skills for those who need support in Year 7.
- Teachers set regular homework that supports pupils' progress in a wide range of subjects; this is particularly strong in mathematics. Additional time and space provided at the end of the school day means that all pupils have the opportunity to be able to complete their homework.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- The vast majority of pupils are confident and say that they are now much more positive about their learning. The school has raised their aspirations about what they can achieve. A great example of this is the 'Brilliant Club' where pupils are able to access university-level work and challenge themselves on difficult topics. As a result, pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem are rising.
- A good programme that supports personal, social, health and emotional development including assemblies, visiting speakers, tutorial sessions and lessons is in place. Pupils have a clear understanding of their own personal development. In several Year 10 tutorial sessions, pupils were reviewing their learning on personal development and were considering the impact this had on their own life.
- Pupils are developing a greater enthusiasm for learning as a result of improvements in the quality of teaching. A good example was seen in a Year 10 English lesson when pupils who had found English a major challenge were more than happy to read aloud in front of the class. Many pupils now enjoy their mathematics lessons.
- Pupils feel very safe at the school. They are well informed about the different kinds of bullying and the importance of keeping themselves safe online. Pupils say that bullying is rare in school and when it happens it is dealt with swiftly.

- A clear awareness exists about the importance of safeguarding within the school. Leaders work hard with pupils, parents and external agencies to develop effective lines of regular communication and ensure that any concerns about pupils are fully followed up.
- There is high take-up of the vast range of additional opportunities at lunchtime, after school and at weekends. These help develop pupils physically and socially. A large number of pupils were involved in the recent local carnival which is a large part of Bridgwater's cultural heritage.
- The school works effectively with partner primary schools and the Somerset Challenge 'family of schools' it belongs to. Transition for pupils from primary to secondary school is smooth because information is shared well between the schools. Key staff get to know pupils well before they start in Robert Blake and are able to fully support them and their families when they arrive at the school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils conduct themselves very well around the school site. As a result, a very calm and warm atmosphere permeates the school throughout the day. Pupils take good care of their environment and wear their uniform with pride.
- Pupils move promptly to lessons and arrive well prepared for learning. A deep 'thirst for learning' is beginning to develop among pupils. Pupils respond well to their teachers and are keen to do well.
- The school has high expectations and will not tolerate any inappropriate behaviour. As a result, there was a rise in fixed-term exclusions last year, but monitoring of recent behaviour shows a considerable improvement.
- Attendance at the school has improved to be above the national average in most year groups. The school's leaders and staff work extremely hard to increase the levels of attendance. Engaging with a number of different agencies, the school ensures that pupils attend regularly and are happy. Senior leaders are fully aware of the need to improve the attendance of a small number of persistent absentees in Year 11.
- Pupils who attend alternative provision are well supported. As a result of close communication and regular contact about the development of pupils, some re-integrate successfully into the school.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- The achievement of current pupils is good and improving. Pupils in all year groups enter the school with low levels of skill in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils currently in the school make much improved progress from their starting points compared with previous years. Senior and subject leaders are robust in checking the reliability and accuracy of assessment information.
- Pupils in Year 11 are currently on track to make better progress in English and mathematics than Year 11 pupils in 2015. The gaps in achievement between different groups of pupils are narrowing.
- Too much variation in achievement existed, across a range of different subjects including English, mathematics and science, in Year 11 outcomes in 2015. However, the school's current assessment information shows that this variation has decreased and continues to do so for each year group. This was confirmed by inspectors' observations in lessons. In particular, pupils now make much better progress in English and mathematics.
- The school's intensive focus on improving pupils' reading, writing and speaking skills is having a noticeable impact in Year 7. This has led to increases in the reading ages of many pupils in Years 8 and 9. Pupils make good use of the opportunities to read widely, often selecting challenging texts to broaden their experiences and love of reading.
- Boys' achievement is improving to be much closer to that of girls in a wide range of subjects. This improving picture is much more evident in Years 7, 8 and 9.
- A large proportion of the disadvantaged pupils who enter the school have attainment lower than that of other pupils. In the past, these pupils have not made sufficient progress to catch up. For pupils currently in the school, including those in Year 11, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is narrowing. The gap in Years 7, 8 and 9 is narrowing rapidly.
- The achievement of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs rose in 2015. In lessons, observations of these pupils supported the continued narrowing of the achievement gap between them and other pupils.

- The good progress made in English by most-able pupils has been sustained. In mathematics, in 2015, a small number of most-able pupils did not achieve as well as they could. As a result, more appropriate challenge is now being given to most-able pupils in mathematics and a wide range of subjects. Pupils are currently on track to meet these challenging targets.
- Those pupils in Years 10 and 11 who spend part of their time in Bridgwater College or L&F Inspired Hair Academy are well prepared for their next steps. Almost all progress to post-16 programmes at Bridgwater College and successfully complete their courses.
- A very small number of students in Years 7 to 9 who spend time in alternative provision are all successfully re-integrated into the school and make good progress. The school carefully monitors pupils who complete years 10 or 11 in alternative provision to make sure that they are well prepared for the next steps in employment, education or training.

School details

Unique reference number	123878
Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	10002424

This inspection was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	729
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Richard Cheetham
Headteacher/Principal/Teacher in charge	Mr Rob Gammon
Telephone number	01278 456243
Website	www.robertblake.org.uk
Email address	office@blake.somerset.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	5–6 December 2013

Information about this school

- Robert Blake is a smaller than average secondary school.
- There have been additional appointments to both the leadership team and the governing body since the previous inspection.
- Most pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for support through the pupil premium funding is well above the national average. This is additional government funding to support pupils who are eligible for free school meals, those who are in the care of the local authority or pupils from service families.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is above the national average.
- The school is part of the 'Somerset Challenge' and as a result works closely with a family of schools.
- The school is currently receiving support from a national leader in education.
- The school uses two alternative providers for a very small number of pupils: the Bridge School and South Somerset College. The school also uses Bridgwater College and L&F Inspired Hair Academy for a number of Year 10 and 11 pupils to gain access to vocational courses as part of their curriculum.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 34 lessons across a wide range of subjects including some small-group intervention work and tutorial sessions. Many of the lessons were observed jointly with leaders from the school. Inspectors also listened to pupils read.
- Discussions took place with the headteacher, other leaders in the school, various members of staff and three representatives of the governing body, including the Chair of the Governing Body.
- Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation, minutes of meetings, external consultants' reports, records for monitoring the quality of teaching, assessment information, and behaviour and attendance data.
- Inspectors spoke to many pupils about their experience at the school, and during lessons they looked carefully at the quality of pupils' work and the accuracy of the school's assessment information. The lead inspector also spoke with a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors took into account 34 responses from Parent View (Ofsted's online survey) and 90 responses from the staff questionnaire.

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