

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Peter Smart
Headteacher
The Castle School
Park Road
Thornbury
South Gloucestershire
BS35 1HT

Dear Mr Smart

Short inspection of The Castle School

Following my visit, with Katherine Powell, Her Majesty's Inspector, to the school on Tuesday 26 January 2016, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in June 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

You, your senior leaders and governors have an accurate understanding of the strengths of the school and of what needs to be improved further to ensure that all teaching and learning are at the very high level expected. Your self-evaluation is detailed, perceptive, honest and accurate.

Under your leadership, the culture and ethos of the school have been developed to become an absolute strength. This underpins much of what is good or better about the school. You are supported well by governors, other senior leaders, teachers, other staff and pupils in maintaining a clear and relentless focus on making sure that all pupils and sixth form learners achieve as well as they can. You also recognise that this requires pupils and learners to be secure and confident physically, emotionally and mentally. There is an excellent focus in all that the school does on the all-round personal development, welfare, safety and well-being of all pupils. However, you also recognise that to achieve the very high standards you expect, some further improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of pupils is required. You are working relentlessly to secure these improvements. Governors have a wide breadth of experience and expertise so that they provide you

and other school leaders with a very good balance of excellent support and extremely robust challenge. The school is well placed to continue to improve.

The arrangements for monitoring and evaluating pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching, at the subject, faculty and whole-school level, have been developed and refined so that they are extremely robust. This enables you to accurately identify where intervention is necessary to improve the quality of teaching and learning, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of any actions you take and of any additional support provided for pupils. As a result, the very good programme for the professional development of teachers and support staff is targeted well on those aspects of their work that require improvement. There is an excellent balance of training that benefits all teachers, enhances work in subject departments and provides highly focused support for individuals. Your detailed understanding of the relative strengths and areas for improvement across subjects enables you to adopt a flexible approach, giving subject leaders and teachers the freedom to develop ways of teaching that work best in that subject. Subject-level improvement planning is well established, effective in driving improvement and carefully tailored to need.

Pupils and learners in the school mostly achieve well, and many achieve very well, because teaching is almost always at least good and is sometimes outstanding. Pupils conduct themselves well in lessons and have a very positive approach to their learning. Teachers generally give pupils good feedback on their work so that they know how to improve it. The large majority of pupils, but not all, act on this feedback when they are clear what they need to do. As a result, they mostly make at least good progress.

You and your senior and subject leaders are fully aware that the progress of a small number of pupils needs to be better, including some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are supported by additional funding through the pupil premium. There is clear evidence that the actions you have taken to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils are working well in Years 7 to 9. The gap between the achievement of these pupils and others has almost been eliminated. Teachers, subject and senior leaders know individual pupils extremely well, including their current achievement, personal circumstances and potential barriers to learning. This holistic approach is highly effective in supporting pupils to do well.

Leaders have correctly identified that a minority of planning and teaching needs to give more attention to current achievement. Some teachers need to check learning in lessons more carefully. You also know that, while this has improved, there is too much variation in the achievement of learners across the range of subjects, and within some subjects, in the sixth form. This is being addressed through well-targeted interventions and support, but some further improvements in the quality of teaching in the sixth form are still required.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and the way they are prepared for life in modern Britain, is an extremely strong feature of the school. Pupils have a very secure understanding of fundamental British values. This

permeates the life of the school and the curriculum. The approach is very effectively underpinned by the excellent set of 'The Castle School Values' that pupils know and apply well. Pupils are very supportive of each other inside and outside of classrooms. Pupils doing exceptionally well and those that are finding the work difficult are equally well supported by their peers.

The school prepares all pupils and sixth-form learners well so that they can plan for their destinations when they leave the school. The very good 'life-skills curriculum' builds well from Year 7 to Year 13. It has a strong focus on full and impartial careers guidance and develops pupils' and learners' employability skills, as well as contributing effectively to their wider personal development. The school's engagement with employers and other external agencies is highly impressive and used exceptionally well to prepare pupils and learners for their next steps.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed, complete and of a high quality.

The leadership team has created a highly effective culture and harmonious community, building on the school ethos and values, that keeps pupils safe. Effective procedures ensure that the safety of all pupils is paramount. Pupils feel safe, are safe and know what to do if they have any concerns. The one-stop-shop student services, that is attended by a member of staff throughout the school day and provides guidance and advice on an extremely wide range of issues, provides an excellent resource that helps to build pupils' confidence. Leaders strive to promote, with success, the idea that every adult in school is like a parent.

All staff are fully aware of all aspects of safeguarding as a result of effective training. They are secure in their understanding of their 'Prevent' duty and how to deal with extremism and prevent radicalisation.

The comprehensive 'life-skills curriculum', including lessons, tutorials and assemblies, ensures that pupils are very well informed about how to keep themselves safe, fit and healthy. Pupils were explicit and eloquent in their understanding of the importance of keeping themselves safe when they are using computers and other devices online. One pupil gave a clear example, from a recent lesson, about how 'images posted online are forever and they simply cannot be erased'.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed to look at three areas where you have been working with teachers to improve the quality of teaching and where there are indications of the impact of this: the focus on the achievement of all individuals, as well as groups of pupils; the quality of the feedback to pupils on their work and how well they improve their work as a result; and the development of pupils' reading, writing, speaking and mathematical skills.

- We confirmed that almost all teaching overall is at least good and some is outstanding. In most lessons, the expectations of what pupils are expected to learn are clear, but these are not always followed through well in the lesson.
- A small minority of teachers do not check the learning taking place in lessons carefully enough, for example by using targeted questions to check, probe, share and deepen learning.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils on their work is mostly at least good. In most cases, but not all, this feedback makes clear to pupils what they need to do to improve their work. However, not all teachers check that improvements follow.
- Pupils' reading, writing and speaking skills are developed well in many lessons. We saw some excellent examples in Year 9 mathematics lessons where pupils talking and writing about their work helped to develop their mathematical understanding and reasoning. Teachers' marking of pupils' work usually picks up spelling and grammatical errors and there is a good focus on the use of specialist vocabulary.
- Work on enhancing pupils' mathematical skills across a range of subjects is at a much earlier stage of development. However, there are good plans for developing common approaches to, for example, mathematical operations and calculations.
- The 2015 examination results showed that outcomes in mathematics had dipped. We agreed that you and I would look at mathematics together during this inspection. Observations of teaching and learning in mathematics showed a much improved picture and supported your own information about pupils' current good levels of achievement. Pupils' work showed clearly that good, and often very good, learning was taking place across, for example, a range of Year 9 mathematics teaching groups. However, the most-able pupils are not always challenged to do as well as they can; when all work is marked correctly, this is not always taken as an indication that it may not be challenging enough.
- The 2015 examination results showed that the achievement of disadvantaged pupils had improved since 2014, but the gaps between the achievement of those pupils and others was still too wide. The approaches taken to tackle this, particularly in Years 7 to 9, have been highly effective so that these gaps have almost been eliminated.
- Attendance is showing improvements. You have undertaken a detailed analysis of attendance information, with weekly support from the education welfare officer, and identified a small group of pupils who are persistently absent. Some of these have complex medical needs and you are working well with local GPs and other medical staff to do what you can to help these pupils attend school more regularly. You accept that the attendance of a very small number of pupils is not improving rapidly enough and you are actively investigating other strategies to deal with this. The investigation of poor attendance is meticulous and involves parents as much as possible.
- The number of pupils excluded from the school for fixed periods has dropped significantly since the previous inspection and exclusions are now rare. The number of recorded incidents of unacceptable behaviour has also fallen significantly; pupils confirmed that behaviour has improved.

- In the sixth form, the 2015 examination results showed some variations across subjects, with some doing very well and others less well. In some subjects, learners with similar starting points achieved too wide a spread of grades. Sixth-form leaders are fully aware of this.
- Sixth-form learners' progress is now monitored very carefully. Sixth-form leaders, and many subject leaders, quickly identify any learners who are falling behind. They challenge teachers and subject leaders to explain what they are doing to help these learners. However, many of the actions taken to support the learner take place outside of the classroom rather than addressing some weaknesses in teaching.
- The quality of learning in sixth-form lessons is variable: some is outstanding, as seen in the quality of learners' work in art, media and French; in a small number of other subjects, such as in biology and physics, learners' work shows that it is not good enough.
- When learning in the sixth form is weakest, it is because teachers do not make the best use of lesson time, or teachers do not establish well enough what each learner can and cannot do, to build on this existing knowledge effectively.
- Many classrooms in the school, including those in the sixth form centre, are not in good condition. Teachers make the most of unenticing spaces, using very good displays of pupils' work to provide a stimulating learning environment. The school manages to make effective use of the buildings in the sixth form centre that are not fit for purpose, so that learning is not inhibited significantly.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should build on the excellent practice that there is in the school to ensure that all teachers:

- establish precisely what pupils and sixth-form learners can do, know and understand, and what they cannot do so well, and use this to plan and teach so that pupils and sixth-form learners always make at least good progress
- check learning more carefully during lessons, including in the sixth form, and respond accordingly
- provide pupils and sixth-form learners with precise feedback on what they need to do to improve their work, and then check the impact of this on their future work.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for South Gloucestershire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

At the start of the inspection, we met with you and other senior leaders to review your self-evaluation and other information to determine the lines of enquiry for the inspection.

We then held further meetings with you, your senior leaders, other key members of staff, the chair of the governing body, the executive headteacher (chief executive) of the Castle School Educational Trust and with pupils.

We observed learning, with you and other senior leaders, in a range of subjects and year groups, including in the sixth form. In these lessons, we looked at pupils' or sixth-form learners' work and talked with them about it. During our tours of the school, we looked at displays of pupils' work, including that arising from activities about their personal development and well-being. An assembly about mental health, partly presented by pupils from the school council, was also observed.

A range of documented evidence was looked at, including information about pupils' and sixth-form learners' current achievement and attendance. We also discussed your latest evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

We undertook activities to ensure that safeguarding arrangements were effective.