

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



4 March 2016

Dame Sue Bourne
The Avenue Special School
Conwy Close
Tilehurst
Reading
Berkshire
RG30 4BZ

Dear Dame Sue

Short inspection of The Avenue Special School

Following my visit to the school on 23 February 2016 with Ross Macdonald, Ofsted Inspector, 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 outstanding in March 2011.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the academy since the predecessor school's last inspection. You lead with enthusiasm, vision and a determination to do all that is possible to improve outcomes for your pupils. You have made exceptionally good use of the opportunities afforded to you by the school's conversion to academy status. For example, you have restructured the senior leadership team to ensure that the best use is made of their highly developed skills and experience. Together, you make a dynamic team that successfully engenders a caring and committed culture where innovation and high expectations permeate through the work of staff.

The strength of the changes you have made to the senior leadership team is demonstrated by how very well their checks on teaching and learning are organised. Each leader is responsible for key areas of the school's provision. They are accountable for reviewing the effectiveness of the areas for which they are responsible, and lead improvements with passion and insight. Consequently, leaders know the individual needs of each pupil exceptionally well and ensure that their plans for improvement have pupils' individual pathways in mind.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is the bedrock of the exceptional provision offered at the school. Teachers know their pupils extremely well and deliver meticulously planned lessons enthusiastically. Every opportunity to support pupils' development is taken because of the carefully designed and innovative curriculum. For example, it was a pleasure to observe how a snack session was organised to help pupils on the autistic spectrum meet their individual targets with such enthusiasm.

You have ensured that leaders continually look for ways to improve how the curriculum can meet the individual needs of pupils. The performing arts continue to be central to the life and community of the school that is so successful in preparing pupils for their next stage of education, employment or training. There are daily opportunities to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, for example in the celebration assembly I observed. In these, as well as in lessons, pupils experience opportunities to explore characterisation through role play, helping them to appreciate differences, celebrate culture and develop a love of learning.

You and other leaders track each pupil's progress exceptionally well. All analysis includes a review of how well disadvantaged pupils are doing. Pupils are identified quickly when they are at risk of not making the desired progress and new initiatives and strategies are implemented. This means that pupils are quick to receive the extra support that they need to remove any barriers to their progress. This includes the carefully designed therapies and interventions that have been developed by leaders. Consequently, all groups of pupils make exceptional progress from their starting points.

Governors now receive a much broader and in-depth range of information about how well pupils are doing at the school. Leaders have been trialling new assessment systems to review and judge how well pupils are doing, and this is shared regularly with the governing body. However, leaders evaluate pupils' achievements in such a wide-ranging number of ways that, at times, their analysis of what it means for pupils' outcomes overall is not as sharp as it could be. Governors meet regularly and visit the school to see for themselves how the school is working. They know the school well and provide challenge to leaders on the areas they discuss in meetings.

There are now robust target-setting procedures at the school which are consistently used for all pupils. These are clearly displayed in all classrooms and teachers make clear reference to them in the learning opportunities they plan for pupils. Aply supported by other leaders, you have therefore have tackled the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are particularly well managed and so policies and procedures are embedded and robust. Leaders ensure that the relevant checks are made when employing new staff. There are very well-thought-out structures in the school to ensure that appropriately trained leaders are available to deal with any concerns that staff may have. All staff meticulously follow the safeguarding procedures at the school. Risk assessments are rigorously completed to ensure that the specific needs of pupils have been carefully considered and their safety robustly protected. There is a designated governor who has oversight of safeguarding. This ensures that leaders are held to account for how well the policies and procedures are working. One of the deputy headteachers has responsibility for child protection and works very closely with other agencies to ensure that pupils' needs are always held as a priority. He fulfils this role with absolute commitment and, when necessary, tenacity.

The strength of community developed in the curriculum is reflected in the fact that pupils report that they feel extremely safe. All parents rightly share this view. The strength of community is supported by the excellent work you and other leaders undertake to support parents and bridge the gap between home and school. For example, the work that has been undertaken to improve homework is particularly useful in giving parents some direction about how they can support their own child's development.

Inspection findings

- Together with the visionary leadership of the headteacher, senior leaders make an extremely effective team. Their highly developed expertise is utilised very well to ensure that provision is precisely tailored to the individual needs of the pupils at the school. There is very strong capacity for continued improvement. Leaders' sharp focus on teaching and learning ensures that members of the teaching team are skilled and enthusiastic about their roles. Consequently, pupils make outstanding progress from their starting points.
- Leaders' checks on teaching and learning are comprehensive and accurate. These are carefully reviewed alongside the performance management targets for staff. This means that leaders have an accurate view of where provision is strongest and where extra work is needed. The school's plans for improvement are sharply focused on these areas and so provision is continually being improved.
- The leadership of teaching and learning is robust and effective. There are clear career opportunities that are available and have been utilised by teachers and support staff. Performance management is an effective tool for ensuring that staff fulfil their potential, and that teaching and learning are highly effective. Leaders ensure that pupils get access to the therapies and interventions that they need and this ensures that provision is exceptionally well matched to pupils' individual needs.

- The curriculum on offer to pupils is innovative and exciting. The use of the performing arts continues to permeate through all of the learning opportunities for pupils. Consequently, pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is particularly strong. Diversity is celebrated. Equality of opportunity is secured through the tailored approach of teachers to meet pupils' individual needs.
- Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare are all outstanding. Leaders' systems for analysing behaviour are efficient and well developed. The inclusion support team is very effective. They have developed clear systems for staff to follow in order to report and review patterns of pupils' behaviour at the school. Pupils benefit from well-considered behaviour plans which staff utilise to extremely good effect. This leads to improved behaviour over time. Support mechanisms are strong and training is provided for all staff. Their work to improve attendance is highly effective and pupils attend well. Leaders have successfully improved attendance in 2015 from an already very high position in 2014.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is extremely well developed to meet the needs of the pupils. Teachers use assessment particularly well to plan bespoke targets for pupils to work towards. These are consistently displayed in classrooms and are regularly referred to in lessons. Pupils are regularly given activities and opportunities to work towards their targets.
- Support staff, such as teaching assistants, make an invaluable contribution to the learning experiences of pupils. They are highly skilled and provide a consistent, targeted level of support for pupils. Teams know each other and the pupils they are working with exceptionally well. As a result, they work seamlessly together to ensure that every opportunity is used to help pupils to make progress.
- All groups of pupils make outstanding progress. This is evident in the comprehensive assessment information collected by leaders, in lessons and in pupils' work and achievements.
- The pupil premium grant is used exceptionally well. Leaders undertake thorough evaluations of the barriers to learning that disadvantaged pupils at the school face. This leads to innovative, strategic decisions about how to make the best use of the monies to help pupils develop. For example, having identified the high level of sensory needs of many of their disadvantaged pupils, leaders rightly looked to increase their access to occupational therapy to improve pupils' ability to access learning.
- The early years provision is equally as effective as that in the rest of the school. For example, the leadership of the early years is excellent. The learning environment is very well designed to meet the children's needs. Leaders ensure that assessment is the foundation on which the provision is amended to cater for children's next steps of development. There are very strong systems to support teaching, behaviour and the welfare of children. Children show very high levels of commitment to their learning because of how well the provision meets their needs and interests.

- Sixth-form learners also benefit from carefully delivered and bespoke learning journeys. The deputy headteacher provides invaluable oversight to support the highly effective leadership of the department. As a result, the curriculum is often precisely adapted to ensure that learners receive the experiences that will best prepare them for their next stage of education, employment or training.
- Senior leaders have made very good use of collaborative opportunities to ensure that they are able to look dispassionately at the effectiveness of the school. For example, they have made links with other special schools to carry out moderation and assessment activities. The headteacher is involved in a number of collaborative groups, both locally and nationally. This ensures that she remains up to date about changes in education policy and practice. The success of the school is also reflected in the regular support given to other schools on their own improvement journeys, including through the work with the neighbouring teaching school, Churchend School Academy, as part of the teaching alliance group.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the new assessment system is refined further so that it is more immediately accessible.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Reading Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Barnes
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, both deputy headteachers, the three assistant headteachers, a group of governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, and a group of pupils. Inspectors visited six lessons and one assembly, all accompanied by a member of the senior leadership team, to observe teaching and learning. Inspectors scrutinised a selection of pupils' work and discussed their achievements with senior leaders. They considered the responses of 15 parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors analysed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the improvement plan, assessment information about the achievement and outcomes of pupils, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures.