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Mrs Pamela Jones
Principal
St Christopher's Academy
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Dear Mrs Jones

Short inspection of St Christopher's Academy

Following my visit to the school on 9 February 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 the predecessor school, St Christopher's Lower School, was judged to be good in January 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the academy since the last inspection of its predecessor school. St Christopher's Academy is a very positive place for pupils to develop and learn. You have instilled a sense of purpose amongst pupils, parents, staff and governors since the setting up of the academy in 2013. Staff have risen well to the challenge of extending the age range of the pupils from nine to 11 years. Your high expectations ensure that standards in English and mathematics continue to rise. The key issues from the last inspection of the predecessor school have been turned into strengths as a result of your determined leadership and expertise; for instance, the results achieved by pupils in Year 1 in the phonics (the sounds that letters make) screening test are now above the national average. This previous weakness is now a strong feature of the school's work.

The positive climate for learning that you have established is mirrored fully in the vibrant displays of pupils' work in classrooms and around the school. Pupils love coming to school because teachers endeavour to make learning both challenging and exciting. They provide an extensive range of extra activities either in lessons or beyond the classroom which enable pupils to develop their skills.

You set high expectations of pupils for how they behave and relate to one another. Furthermore, you have firmly established a set of agreed values to which both staff and pupils are expected to adhere. As a result, pupils behave very well in lessons and around the school. There is a sense of community and purpose throughout the school.

Your strategic vision for the school is shared fully by governors and other leaders. Priorities for further improvement are clearly identified within the improvement plan. Rigorous and regular monitoring of the school's work by you and the governing body accurately identifies the areas for further improvement.

Many parents are very positive about what has been achieved in a short time as the academy has grown. You have established a number of opportunities for parents to be fully involved in the development of the school. These include a regular parents' forum, a very informative website and termly newsletters about forthcoming events. However, about a quarter of parents who responded to the online survey feel that communication could be better, particularly about the progress their child is making in class. Leaders recognise that with changes nationally in the use of levels to assess the progress of pupils, more explanation for parents about the progress that their child makes is needed.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team ensures that procedures for the safety and well-being of pupils at the school are applied with rigour. Regular training in safeguarding requirements ensures that all staff and governors are never complacent about the safety and welfare of all pupils.

All safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements. Records are of high quality and any issues related to child protection are referred to the appropriate agencies quickly. Senior leaders with specific responsibility for the needs of the most vulnerable pupils monitor their progress very carefully to ensure that they are well cared for.

Inspection findings

- Senior leaders and governors of the school are determined in their drive to implement further improvement. Effective use is made of external consultants to evaluate accurately the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school. Teaching and learning across the school is good overall, with some outstanding practice evident. Leaders of the school set high expectations of teachers.
- A wide range of activities, including the observation of lessons, is used to monitor the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Where teaching requires improvement, individual teachers are supported well to develop their skills and expertise further.

- The pupils' literacy skills are developed very well. The teaching of phonics is especially effective. As a result, younger pupils in Years 1 and 2 make good progress in their literacy development.
- The proportion of pupils in Year 2 writing at age-related expectations is above the national average. Punctuation and the spelling of simple words are accurate. Many of these pupils write in a neat, flowing style which prepares them well for their next stage of learning in Year 3.
- Scrutiny of pupils' writing from Year 3 to Year 6 confirms that this good progress is sustained in all classes in Key Stage 2. As a result, the vast majority of these pupils are writing at the expected level by the end of Year 6, with nearly half of them exceeding age-related expectations in writing.
- The teaching of mathematics is good. Recent training by the mathematics subject leader has increased levels of subject knowledge for all staff. As a result, there is now a stronger emphasis on problem solving and the ability of pupils to master new mathematical concepts.
- Teachers ensure that there are greater levels of challenge in mathematics and especially so for the most-able pupils. They use questions well to extend pupils' thinking, and deepen knowledge and understanding. The most-able pupils in Year 6 say that work is now more challenging. They display very positive attitudes towards their learning in mathematics.
- These improvements in the teaching of mathematics are yet to be fully reflected in an increased proportion of pupils achieving standards that exceed age-related expectations by the end of Key Stage 2.
- The assessment of pupil progress is good. Teachers monitor the achievements of pupils regularly against age-related criteria. This information is carefully recorded and used well to support lesson planning and track the progress of individual pupils.
- All teachers and staff provide high-quality feedback to pupils about how they are doing and what they need to do next to improve. Teachers mark the pupils' work regularly. The inclusion of mini-targets for the pupils to complete in the next lesson consolidates pupils' learning, eliminates mistakes and accelerates progress.
- Accelerated progress is evident in the performance of more disadvantaged pupils in receipt of the pupil premium (government funding for those pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority). This funding is used effectively to provide specific support for these pupils, including the most vulnerable. As a result, gaps in achievement are narrowing in line with similar pupils nationally.
- Pupils with special educational needs or disability make good progress because of carefully targeted support by teaching assistants in lessons or specific sessions in small groups in teaching areas.
- Leaders and governors make effective use of accurate assessment information to monitor the progress of different groups of pupils and support the performance management of staff.

- Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are provided with many opportunities to learn through play. Staff in the now-expanded Nursery setting monitor the progress of these children carefully. They provide a good range of learning experiences in all areas of learning within well-organised indoor and outdoor settings.
- The curriculum is broad, balanced and exciting. Well-planned lessons and imaginative topics enthuse pupils about their learning. For instance, Year 6 pupils talk enthusiastically about their recent topic on Brazil and their investigation about light in science.
- A wide range of extra activities outside lessons further enriches the learning experiences for many pupils. Good opportunities are provided for older pupils to excel both in sport and other competitions. For instance, a team of talented pupils in Year 6 recently came third in a national mathematics competition held at Cambridge University.
- The development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a significant strength of the school. The British values of democracy, tolerance and respect for others are fully reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of pupils towards each other and adults within the school.
- Assemblies are used effectively to provide pupils with extra insight into different cultures as well as information about how to keep themselves safe. Regular reference is made to the school's core values. As a result, pupils adhere to these and instances of bullying and discrimination are rare. Pupils say that when they do occur, school leaders and teachers deal with them quickly.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the proportion of pupils exceeding age-related expectations in mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 is as high as that attained in English
- teaching is consistently good or better in all classes
- communication with parents is improved so that they are fully informed about the progress that their child is making in class and what is happening at the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Philip Mann
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The inspector scrutinised a range of documents, and jointly observed teaching and learning in all classes with the Principal. Further meetings were held with the Principal, subject leader for mathematics, the coordinator for special educational needs, the Chair of the Governing Body and a parent governor. The school's safeguarding arrangements were examined closely. Discussions were also held with a group of pupils from Year 6 about their work. The inspector met with some parents at the school gate. The inspector reviewed 31 responses on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 12 free-text messages. There were no responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire.