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Dear Mr Brown

Short inspection of Blackfen School for Girls

Following my visit to the school on 1 March 2016, with Matt Tiplin, Her Majesty's 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 good in November 2011.

This school continues to be good.

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

You have continued to maintain an accurate, honest and highly effective self-evaluation of the school, including the sixth form. Your self-evaluation is accurate in identifying the areas of strength and those areas that need to be developed. The Penhill Academies Trust has appointed an external consultant to challenge and support you and your leaders. Equally, governors are highly enthusiastic and challenging in their work to improve the quality of education for pupils.

You and your leaders have addressed areas for improvement within your plan to raise achievement. As a result, the development of pupils' English skills is a focus across the school. Pupils are actively encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles, and explore their learning through aspirational discussions. The dialogue between pupils and their teachers is frank and open regarding their progress. Consequently, the learning of pupils is deepened in many lessons.

The attendance of all pupils is high and exclusions are rare. A strong culture of friendship exists. The behaviour of the vast majority of pupils is supportive, respectful and polite. Staff ensure learning is calm and purposeful for pupils in the Phoenix and Jigsaw resource areas.

You place the needs of all pupils and their well-being at the centre of school life. A pilot scheme to promote the welfare and aspirations of pupils has recently been introduced. The scheme has enabled pupils to access welfare support from professional health partners. Consequently, the needs of the more vulnerable pupils are well met. The vast majority of parents who completed Ofsted's online Parent View survey recognise the action the school takes to look after all pupils. Many praise your leadership.

Your senior leaders have developed a systematic and clear approach to checking the work of teachers. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is a strength of the school. Pupils achieve well and make good progress in a large majority of subjects at Key Stage 3. They achieve exceptionally well in mathematics at Key Stage 4. However, some differences exist in the progress made by pupils across the school, particularly in science and English. Learners in the sixth form perform stronger in work-related subjects. You and your leadership team have identified the priorities for improving the outcomes for pupils and learners in the sixth form. You are right to acknowledge that exceptional achievement in mathematics in 2015 highlights the gap between maths and other subjects in terms of progress being made, despite above-average attainment.

The school's latest information on pupils' performance indicates that outcomes are above national expectations. Performance gaps between mathematics and English have sharply reduced. The leader in charge of the sixth form rightly recognises that achievement in academic subjects needs to improve still further.

Leaders across the school have a very clear understanding of the strengths in teaching, learning and assessment. They have high expectations and any teaching that is not up to standard is swiftly addressed. Performance management targets set for teachers are clear and focused on the achievement of pupils. Regular meetings are used appropriately to develop the skills of staff and share good practice.

Leaders have reviewed the curriculum. It is broad, flexible and meets the needs of pupils to contribute well to their learning. A good range of subjects is on offer and includes work-related and academic courses. Furthermore, pupils can now study two languages at Key Stages 3 and 4. This promotes opportunities for pupils to extend their cultural understanding and develop linguistic skills.

The school environment is generally bright, clean and tidy. A vibrant and colourful reception area is welcoming to visitors. Learning displays around the school celebrate pupils' achievement and raise aspirations and expectations still further. Therefore, staff and pupils take pride in the environment. Site staff ensure the school buildings are well maintained and that the corridors are free from litter and graffiti. Pupils are mindful that it is their school and show respect for all areas. Parents are complimentary about the environment and atmosphere of the school. They say the school is welcoming and that it has a caring atmosphere.

Pupils are involved in regular assemblies, which strongly promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They develop respect for peers and are tolerant of others. Pupils learn about different faiths and cultures, through the

curriculum, educational trips, and the well-established international links with your partner school.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school has a clear, careful and thorough approach to all aspects of safeguarding. The single central record for recording recruitment checks made on staff meets statutory requirements and is regularly scrutinised by the governor responsible for safeguarding. You and your leaders make sure that safeguarding is a high focus for the school. Staff understand their important role in promoting pupils' safety, and ensuring all pupils understand how to reduce risk. They work carefully with external agencies to support pupils' welfare, care, guidance and support.

All staff and governors regularly undertake safeguarding training. It includes the delivery of aspects such as female genital mutilation, child sexual exploitation, and preventing radicalisation and extremism. The school works effectively with the police, the local authority and healthcare services to help safeguard pupils. Leaders often review safeguarding training to ensure that pupils feel safe and they know how to and with whom to raise concerns. Parents are extremely positive about the school's work to promote the personal development, behaviour and welfare of all pupils. They say the school feels safe for their children.

Inspection findings

- Leaders continue to focus on raising the performance of disadvantaged pupils across the school. They have ensured that gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers have continued to reduce over time. Furthermore, they identify that while achievement in English is high, the progress made by pupils in comparison with mathematics is not as strong.
- Leaders are uncompromising in their efforts to raise achievement further, particularly for the most-able pupils in English. They have correctly identified that progress made by this group of pupils in science could be even stronger. As a result, interventions have been introduced to challenge the most-able pupils to achieve the highest results. Leaders have developed their systems to check closely the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Consequently, all teachers now have a sharper focus on the progress made by all groups of pupils.
- Learners in the sixth form progress well from their starting points. However, they make faster progress in their work-related subjects than they do in more academic courses. The leader responsible for the sixth form holds regular meetings designed to challenge and support staff in addressing this issue and to raise achievement still further. Expectations in the sixth form are high. Male and female learners dress in formal attire and collaborate well together, so that they adopt a professional attitude to their studies.
- Leaders' evaluation of the school's areas for development are accurate. Governors closely check the self-evaluation of all leaders. Consequently, they understand exceptionally well the school's strengths to promote the

personal development, behaviour and welfare of its pupils, and to maintain high expectations for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

- Middle leaders regularly meet with teachers and senior leaders. They stringently monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and offer support for teachers who need it. Strong accountability promotes high expectations of all staff. Leaders and governors challenge any underperformance. All teachers are set professional targets, which focus on the achievement of pupils. They are supported by professional courses and have frequent opportunities to share good practice and develop their skills of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Leaders continue to review the curriculum. Pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 are now provided with an opportunity to study a second language. A review of the sixth form curriculum has been undertaken. As a result, the curriculum now caters better for a broader range of abilities, and provides greater challenge for the most-able learners in the sixth form.
- The school develops the literacy skills of all pupils well. A keen interest in reading exists. During the inspection, pupils from the book club presented an assembly and shared with enthusiasm their views about reading. Throughout the assembly, their peers in the audience sat attentively, and showed respect and tolerance.
- Pupils say that teachers are very helpful and supportive and the school is a community. Parents who responded to the Parent View survey concur with the view of pupils. They say that the school carefully supports the needs of all pupils, and communities work well together within the school. Pupils are keen to attend school. Behaviour is a strength and exclusions are rare and used only as a last resort. Pupils say that when behaviour incidents occur leaders resolve them quickly. As a result, pupils say they feel safe.
- Pupils are very knowledgeable about issues relevant to living in modern Britain, for example managing relationships, democracy, anti-bullying, homophobia, racism and e-safety. Consequently, pupils reported to inspectors, 'It doesn't matter who you are, you will fit in.'
- The school council has a definite purpose, although it believes that interaction with the sixth form is not yet as effective as it could be. Members are elected and take pride in the work they do to support the school. Furthermore, pupil-learning consultants explore a range of issues to help drive improvements. They share the views of pupils on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and regularly meet with school leaders.
- The two specialist resource centres within the school cater sensitively for those who are vulnerable, or pupils who have special educational needs or disability. Pupils in the Jigsaw resource were observed developing their communication skills and deepening their understanding of literacy. In talking with an inspector, one pupil explained how she used specialised equipment to help her read. Pupils in Jigsaw talked enthusiastically about their learning and the work they were also doing in the main school. Pupils make similar progress in comparison to their peers. In the Phoenix centre,

pupils work with interest and focus. Empowering displays and motivational slogans promote a purposeful and calm learning atmosphere. Therefore, with highly effective teacher support pupils progress favourably and without conflict.

- Staff work together well to establish an ethos of 'a vibrant learning community, with a clear focus on raising the aspiration of pupils'. The overwhelming majority of parents commented positively about the level of care shown by staff at the school for all pupils. They consider that a great atmosphere exists between pupils and their peers, and with their teachers.
- The Chair of Governors has an accurate view of the school's performance. Governors regularly visit the school. They perform their statutory duties with a sense of pride and have a keen desire to be involved in the life of the school. For example, the Chair of Governors has established an international link with a partner school in India, and governors acknowledge the success of pupils' progress in literacy through awarding a regular book review prize.
- The governing body is zealous in its desire to challenge the school to improve. Its members set the headteacher challenging targets and review carefully performance management, finances, attendance and pupil achievement. A clear rationale exists to ensure the retention of highly effective staff, and to meet the challenge of recruiting new teachers.
- Governors use their expertise to challenge and hold leaders to account for the work of the school. They have accurately identified the schools' strengths and those areas they deem to require sharper focus or refinement. The safeguarding governor was previously the Chair of the Governing Body. He is well trained and has extensive knowledge of all aspects of safeguarding relevant to the context of the pupils of the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils continue to perform above national expectations in English so that they make sustained and rapid progress
- achievement is consistently high across all subjects, particularly in science.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lamborn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, teachers and support staff, including those responsible for safeguarding. They also met with a representative from the academy trust, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, and the school council. Inspectors spoke informally with pupils and staff.

Inspectors visited a number of lessons with leaders during the day, gathering evidence on teaching, learning and assessment. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's evaluation of its own performance, minutes of governing body meetings, information on the progress of pupils and the single central record of recruitment checks.