

# Bedford Free School

Caldwell Street, Bedford MK42 9AD

<b>Inspection dates</b>	15–16 March 2016
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Good</b>
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 principal and governors have established a clear vision and ethos for the school. Leaders have delivered a school where there are high ambitions for pupils.
- Leaders and governors have a good understanding of the strengths of the school and areas that need more work. Governors robustly hold leaders to account for improvements.
- Leaders have implemented a broad and effective curriculum which places a strong emphasis on developing core knowledge. The curriculum also promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development very effectively.
- Teachers have improved the quality of assessment and feedback so that it is now having a positive impact on pupils' progress.
- Teachers have a strong understanding of their subjects and the exam skills required. As a result of effective teaching, gaps are closing between the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally.
- Pupils value their school community. Pupils respect one another and value their differences. They see this as a strength of their school.
- Pupils are polite, courteous and cooperate well with staff, developing good relationships. Most pupils display very positive attitudes and are rightly proud of their work, which is well organised and well presented.
- Pupils attend well. They feel safe in the school and value the support and mentoring that they receive.
- Pupils are making good progress across most subjects, including in English and mathematics. In areas where outcomes have not been as strong, such as science, progress is improving as a result of more effective teaching.
- Good guidance and support means that almost all those who leave after Year 11 make appropriate choices for their next stage in education, employment or training.

### It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Leaders and governors are not meticulous enough in ensuring that policies are up to date and fit for purpose.
- In some lessons, where teaching is weaker, pupils do not sustain a focus on their learning.
- Despite improvement, some weaknesses persist in teaching and learning, notably in science, and for pupils who have special educational needs or disability.

## Full report

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that leaders and governors are meticulous in reviewing and revising essential school policies so that they:
  - reflect statutory guidance and the good practice that already exists in school
  - reflect the specific needs and circumstances of the school.
  
- Improve outcomes where achievement has lagged behind, for example in science and for pupils who have special educational needs or disability, by:
  - ensuring that work meets pupils' specific learning needs
  - strengthening weaker teaching
  - eradicating off-task behaviour that occasionally disrupts lessons.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The ambition of senior leaders and governors is reflected in the school's vision: 'We believe that given the right circumstances, all children are capable of achieving extraordinary things'. It is an ethos and expectation which is shared by the staff and pupils.
- Leaders have a good understanding of the strengths of the school and what needs to improve, but have an inflated view of the school's overall effectiveness. They respond quickly to any emerging areas of concern to ensure that pupils receive high-quality provision. For example, leaders have acted robustly to address and improve assessment and weaker standards in presentation, writing and reading, identified at the previous inspection.
- Middle leaders undertake regular checks on pupils' progress to ensure that they can quickly identify pupils who are not doing as well as they should. Additional support is put in place to help these pupils make better progress.
- Clear processes for monitoring the quality of teaching give leaders and governors an accurate view of the school's provision. Teachers have collectively identified a range of teaching strategies that they are focusing upon as a school. Linked to these priorities, leaders give precise and specific feedback to staff about the strengths of their teaching and where it needs to improve.
- Staff benefit from a range of training and development opportunities which are closely matched to their performance management needs. Leaders are rightly proud of their 'grow your own' ethos, where they invest in the training of staff new to the teaching profession. This investment has resulted in improved teaching and subject leadership.
- Subject leaders show strong knowledge of their subjects and of the skills pupils need to be successful. As a result, progress in key subjects such as English, mathematics and humanities is strong and other areas, such as science, are rapidly catching up.
- The support and provision for pupils who have special education needs or disability is systematic, but some pupils' achievement targets are not sharp enough. As a result, some teachers do not match work and support well enough to meet pupils' specific learning needs.
- Leaders have used additional pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up funding to bridge gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others. Funding has been used to support catch-up reading programmes, one-to-one tuition, targeted adult support in after-school homework clubs and links with 'Maths mastery'. The school is becoming increasingly successful in reducing gaps from last year for disadvantaged pupils. For example, some of this funding has been directed to successfully and significantly improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced, with a strong emphasis on a deepening of knowledge and building on prior learning. Subject leaders are continually reviewing subject content and assessment to increase the level of challenge and interest of pupils. Reading is central to the curriculum and a heavy investment has been made in the time allocated to this. This focus ensures that pupils develop the confidence to access new and unfamiliar information and prepares them well for the next stage in their education.
- The enrichment programme offers a variety of opportunities both in and out of school, such as charity work, yoga, Bollywood dancing, canoeing, kayaking, school productions and trips. All pupils access, enjoy and participate in these activities.
- Pupils benefit from highly effective information, advice and guidance, and all undertake a work experience placement in Year 10. Pupils have a clear and comprehensive access programme which guides their choices about post-16 education, training or employment including very clear information on apprenticeships. Leaders also work with the very few post-16 pupils who are likely to not sustain their education, employment or training, to find them appropriate alternative opportunities.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is carefully planned and well promoted across the curriculum. Pupils are encouraged to be reflective and socially responsible.
- The curriculum instils a strong emphasis on fundamental British values such as respect, tolerance, democracy, diversity and inclusion. Themed fortnights, assemblies and the learning environment all complement this. Pupils are active participants in the school community, and work in harmony with one another. Pupils were keen to emphasise that they are a community who welcome and appreciate everyone's differences. As a result, pupils are very well prepared for life in modern Britain.

- Parents, pupils and staff are very positive about the school. They say that standards are high and leadership is strong. They are committed to the ethos of the school.
- **The governance of the school**
  - Governors have a range of expertise and use this effectively in their work. They set a clear strategic direction and provide support and challenge to leaders in order to maintain high standards and expectations. Governors add to their knowledge of the school through regular visits to check for themselves that information provided by school leaders is accurate.
  - Governors understand the school's strengths. They ask pertinent, challenging questions to hold leaders to account for the school's performance and identify the correct priorities for improvement. However, the governing body has not ensured that school policies are up to date and fit for purpose.
  - Governors have a good understanding of the quality of teaching through analysis of departmental reviews and outcomes. They have established clear processes for performance management, ensuring that professional targets are the right ones, and that any increases in pay are linked to improved pupil outcomes. They access a range of local authority, external and online training opportunities to enhance their understanding of their responsibilities.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. All staff have been trained on what to do if a concern regarding the safety and welfare of a pupil is raised. Child protection records and files are clearly administered and show strong evidence that leaders actively seek the expertise of external agencies to help them keep pupils safe. The curriculum promotes well pupils' understanding of how to keep themselves safe, through lessons, external visitors, assemblies and the tutoring programme. Although inspectors found no evidence that pupils were unsafe in school, some of the policies and record-keeping related to child protection training are not as rigorous and relevant to the school's practices and specific circumstances as they should be.

### **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good**

- Teaching has improved since the previous inspection and is typically good. Consequently, the majority of pupils make good progress and achieve well.
- Teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve and use strong subject knowledge to plan lessons that challenge pupils in their learning. An example of this was seen in a Year 10 English lesson on poetry analysis where pupils were making accelerated progress as a result of very effective questioning and challenging activities. Pupils respond well to these high expectations.
- Teachers use their accurate assessments to pitch work at the right level, and plan effective learning activities so that pupils can deepen their knowledge and develop skills.
- Good relationships between teachers and pupils ensure that classrooms are purposeful and productive hubs of learning. The calm and focused environment seen in many lessons ensures that pupils can concentrate and enjoy learning.
- Regular and systematic assessment is providing pupils with a good understanding of what they are doing well and what they need to improve. Most marking, in line with the school's policy, is specific and gives pupils clear guidance on how to improve.
- Teachers invest significant learning time in allowing pupils to reflect on their feedback. They give pupils opportunities to successfully reshape, correct or redraft pieces of work and ensure that high standards of presentation and effort are the norm. For most pupils, this is having a significant impact on allowing them to make good progress in most subjects.
- The teaching of literacy is effective, and teachers are committed to helping pupils achieve more. Highly effective examples of this were seen, particularly in science and history, where teachers were tenacious in challenging pupils, in both written work and orally, on the use of correct subject vocabulary and grammatical accuracy. As a result, pupils are able to articulate themselves well in both their verbal and their written responses.
- There is a clear emphasis on developing pupils' reading skills. The school uses the highly focused 'prep time' every day to give pupils opportunities to engage with wider reading. In these sessions, pupils generally choose appropriately challenging books to read for extended periods. All pupils in key stage 3 are engaging with the 'one hundred classics programme' which encourages them to read a range of classic literature. Consequently, pupils read with increasing fluency and confidence.

- The school's homework policy is a real strength of its drive to raise standards. Homework is applied consistently to help pupils deepen their knowledge across a range of subjects. Parents overwhelmingly feel that the homework set is appropriate.

## **Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good**

### **Personal development and welfare**

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils feel safe and well looked after in the school. The school site is secure and well supervised before, during and after school.
- Pupils know how to stay safe online because they are taught about it in lessons, assemblies and through external visitors to the school. They have a clear understanding of different types of abuse and risk, and know how to report and deal with any concerns effectively. They have confidence in the support provided by the pastoral teams.
- Pupils have a clear understanding of how to stay healthy and the importance of this. They access a range of sporting opportunities both during and after school. The school uses high-quality local facilities, in other local schools, athletics stadiums and leisure centres, to ensure that pupils get a wider experience.
- Staff provide a high-quality personal care system. This provision is well planned and administered. Staff mentoring and guidance delivers effective support to the large number of pupils who arrive midway through the year and for the most vulnerable pupils. Parents and pupils are overwhelmingly positive about this.
- Although bullying incidents are rare and reducing, they still remain a concern for some pupils and parents. The systems in place to respond to such incidents, however, are robust.

### **Behaviour**

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- In general, pupils conduct themselves very well and are polite and courteous. Most lessons are calm and purposeful, enabling pupils to learn without any disruption. Pupils are resilient to challenge, participate well and enjoy their lessons.
- Most pupils take responsibility for their own conduct. They are proud to show their 'achievement cards' which give them strong guidance on how to reflect on and review all aspects of their learning and attitudes. However, some pupils do not sustain their focus, particularly when teaching is weaker, and can disengage from their learning.
- Transitions between lessons are excellent, using the one-way systems effectively to move in tighter spaces sensibly. This supports safety around the site, as well as ensuring punctuality to lessons.
- Pupils respect the learning environment. Litter is rare and displays are attractive, well presented and maintained.
- Attendance at the school has improved significantly this year and is now above the national average. The attendance of all groups has risen and they are much closer to the national average for all pupils.
- The school sets high expectations for pupils' behaviour and conduct. Exclusion levels are high, both for fixed-term and for permanent exclusions this year. However, parents and pupils say that sanctions are proportionate, and have confidence that behaviour in the school is good.

## **Outcomes for pupils are good**

- Pupils are making good progress from their starting points because there is a determined focus by staff and pupils to achieve excellence. Pupils' resilience to challenge and their drive to succeed are also vital to these outcomes.
- Although pupils in Year 11 in 2015 entered the school with significantly lower than average attainment at key stage 2, the proportion who achieved five good GCSE passes including English and mathematics was broadly in line with the national average. This represents strong achievement.
- Pupils make excellent progress in English as a result of highly effective teaching and a curriculum which has invested in extensive reading and writing development. This is a consistent picture across year groups.

- Most pupils are making good progress in mathematics and, as in English, attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates are narrowing.
- Strong middle leadership, better teaching and more specific feedback are starting to improve progress for pupils in science and for those pupils who have special educational needs or disability. Information and work provided by the school indicates a clear picture of improving progress for pupils from their different starting points in these areas.
- The most-able pupils make good progress overall and especially in English, humanities and languages. Opportunities in the school's 'enhanced curriculum' develop important skills and qualities in leadership, resilience and problem-solving, as well as raising their aspirations for higher education through a significant range of opportunities such as 'operation Oxbridge' and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programmes.
- Pupils are very well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment. Tutors provide mentoring, and leaders ensure that pupils receive high-quality external independent advice and guidance that is very specific to their needs. As a result, pupils make choices that are highly appropriate to their needs, and the majority are succeeding in their post-16 options.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	138228
<b>Local authority</b>	Bedford
<b>Inspection number</b>	10011794

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Other secondary
<b>School category</b>	Free school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	479
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Nigel Syson
<b>Principal</b>	Mark Lehain
<b>Telephone number</b>	01234 332299
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.bedfordfreeschool.co.uk">www.bedfordfreeschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:info@bedfordfreeschool.co.uk">info@bedfordfreeschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	26–27 February 2014

## Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average-sized school. The current principal has been in post since the school opened in September 2012.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and children who are looked after) is above average.
- The number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average, as is the proportion who speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is average.
- The school does not use alternative provision to educate its pupils. The school occasionally uses Bedford College for work-related learning part-time programmes.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 31 lessons, including a number seen jointly with senior staff.
- Members of the inspection team met with governors, nominated staff and pupils from each year group.
- Inspectors observed pupils arriving at school, in lessons, in assembly, at breaktime, at lunchtime and when moving around the school between lessons.
- The inspection team considered 104 responses to Parent View, the online survey for parents provided by Ofsted.
- Inspectors took account of 28 staff responses to the online survey.
- The inspection team scrutinised documents which included: the school's self-evaluation documents, minutes of governors' meetings, the principal's report to the governors, school assessment information, safeguarding records and school policies and procedures.
- Inspectors scrutinised the various forms of communication the school uses, including the website and information sent to parents and other stakeholders.

## Inspection team

Kim Pigram, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Richard Spencer	Seconded Inspector
Christine Dick	Her Majesty's Inspector



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