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Mr Mark Jones
Principal
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Dear Mr Jones

Short inspection of Belmont Castle Academy

Following my visit to the school on 11 May 2016 with Judith Sumner, 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 good in April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your team have created a rich and safe learning environment. The very attractive corridors, classrooms and outside areas celebrate pupils' achievements and demonstrate the high expectations that teachers have of the work produced by pupils. Specialist teachers for art, music and PE ensure that pupils benefit from good-quality learning opportunities and consequently produce work or perform to a high standard. For example, pupils regularly outperform others in inter-school sports competitions. You and the governors have invested wisely in modern technology, such as iPads and the radio room, so that pupils are being well prepared for the future. This technology is an integral part of pupils' learning. There are many examples of creative work in each class, such as films that pupils have produced as part of their homework, the regular radio broadcasts that pupils write and perform and good-quality research that has further developed their comprehension skills.

The curriculum is underpinned with many interesting opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy skills. Pupils spoke knowledgeably about various books they had read and were enthusiastic about the regular opportunities provided by the school to meet the authors. Pupils were proud to take me to their library and to show me the system for taking books outside at breaktimes. One consequence of this is that since the last inspection pupils' writing has improved. By the end of Year 6, nearly all pupils have developed the required literacy skills in readiness for their

secondary education and an increasing proportion have exceeded these expectations. Teachers challenge the most able to produce interesting pieces of writing where grammar, punctuation and spelling are, in most cases, used proficiently.

It is evident that almost all pupils thoroughly enjoy coming to school. This was confirmed by most of the parents who responded to the online Parent View questionnaire. This year, at 96.6%, attendance is the highest it has ever been and fixed-term exclusions are now rare. A strength of the school is the personal development, behaviour and welfare of pupils. There are quite a few pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable or who are newly arrived in the country. There is also a group who can exhibit very challenging behaviour. The school has developed an experienced support team that cares for these pupils very well. They also pay particular attention to supporting the families of these pupils, for example the opportunities provided for parents to attend the 'positive parenting sessions'.

Last year, assessment information shows that some of the disadvantaged pupils in the school underachieved when compared to the others. You have addressed this issue with determination. This year it is evident that these pupils are making better progress. Pupil premium funding for these pupils is being used efficiently to give them bespoke support to address their particular circumstances. For example, younger disadvantaged readers when in Reception and Year 1 did not do as well as the others. In Year 2, it is evident that the work of the school has enabled most of this group to catch up with their reading. The interventions on offer and the targeted support for pupils to attend the 'Wizard Club' are providing pupils with the necessary additional help required. School information shows that in Year 6, all disadvantaged pupils are on track to meet expectations in mathematics and reading and the very large majority in writing.

Safeguarding is effective.

Procedures for safeguarding are secure. As well as meeting all the statutory requirements on the single central record, additions such as columns that show comprehensively the different safeguarding courses attended by staff demonstrate the safety-conscious culture of the school. Staff and governors are well trained in the 'Prevent' duty requirements and also in other aspects, such as being alert to pupils who may be vulnerable to female genital mutilation.

Bullying is very rare in this school. The atmosphere across the school is one of harmony among the wide diversity of minority ethnic groups represented by pupils. The very well-developed use of technology means that pupils are very aware of the dangers of the internet. Helpfully, the school website also gives parents useful advice on e-safety.

The school is tenacious in ensuring that pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable are not only safe, but making good academic progress. This includes the good quality of support for children that are looked after. Leaders check carefully how well pupils are progressing and readily contact other agencies when the need arises.

Inspection findings

- Self-evaluation by school leaders is accurate and the leadership of teaching and learning is effective. School improvement activity concentrates on the aspects of the school that are in most need of improvement. For example, you and your senior leaders have rightly identified that improvement in the teaching of problem solving and reasoning in mathematics is a priority. Some teachers are very good at this aspect of mathematics, in other classes the opportunity to solve problems is not as well developed.
- The governing body has a good overview of the work of the school. They readily question and challenge you and other leaders on your actions to improve teaching and learning. The school is a standalone academy and the governors have ensured that they take advantage of partnerships with other schools and the services offered by the local authority. This helps them to keep up to date with training and changes to education.
- Governors have worked effectively with you to strengthen the relationship with parents. It is impressive to hear that 370 parents attended a recent open morning where they were able to join their children in lessons.
- The proportion of children that reach a good level of development in the Reception classes is above average. The progress they make is good. Approximately half of the children enter with skill development that is below expectations and many are learning English as an additional language. Consequently, the skills of speaking and listening are less well developed than would be expected. However, dedicated support from well-qualified staff ensures that children learn these skills quickly and catch up to the others.
- Some of the most-able pupils do not reach their potential in mathematics. From their starting points, all make the expected progress, but not many exceed this measure. In some year groups, teachers do not provide pupils with work or ask questions that are hard enough. In addition, these pupils are not provided with enough opportunity to carry out problem solving and reasoning activities that would really make them have to think.
- Most of the pupils, regardless of their starting points, make good progress in key stages 1 and 2 when developing their arithmetic skills, reading and writing. The work provided by teachers is interesting and the guidance they give to each pupil is precise, enabling them to understand how to make improvements.
- Pupils should be proud of their behaviour. They are kind, considerate, polite and friendly. This behaviour is underpinned by the school's effective work to promote fundamental British values across the curriculum. Pupils are trying hard to become more resilient so that they do not give up when the work gets hard. In lessons, it was very evident that there were good relationships between teachers and pupils and that they tried their best to complete work of good quality.
- Playtimes and lunchtimes are great fun. A large well-trained team of adults takes very good care of the pupils. Some pupils take on the role of mentors during these times. Other pupils spoken to explained how helpful

they found these mentors to be, resolving minor arguments when playing outside.

- In history, geography and science, pupils do not have sufficient opportunity to develop the practical subject specific skills such as carrying out experiments in science. Too much of the time is spent on activities that concentrate on the knowledge aspects of these subjects.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the teaching of problem solving and reasoning improves in mathematics and that the teachers challenge the most able, encouraging them to think harder to achieve their potential
- pupils are given more regular opportunities to learn the subject-specific skills in history, geography and 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 Thurrock. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tim Bristow

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other leaders, four governors, administration staff, pupils and members of staff responsible for the care of pupils. Short visits were made to most classrooms, where books were scrutinised. A range of documents, policies and assessment information was examined. Questionnaire responses from parents were also examined.