

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



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Kate Curtis
Headteacher
Wheatley Park School
Holton
Oxford
Oxfordshire
OX33 1QH

Dear Kate Curtis

Short inspection of Wheatley Park School

Following my visit to the school on 14 June 2016 with Mark Bennison, 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 the school was judged to be good in March 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school is improving because of the strong leadership that you and your senior team provide. You have worked closely with governors and directors of the River Learning Trust (RLT) to raise standards of leadership and the quality of teaching and learning. Leaders and governors have a good understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the school and action plans are in place to address areas for development. Working closely with the RLT and other schools, you have obtained useful external validation of the quality of your work.

Since the last inspection, the school has continued to focus on the areas identified for improvement. As a result, the quality of teaching and the impact of teachers' feedback to improve pupils' progress have increased. The proportion of pupils achieving five GCSEs at grades A*–C, including English and mathematics, improved significantly last year. Published information indicates that progress in English had been weak for the last two years, including for boys and disadvantaged pupils. This is no longer the case, and high-quality teaching is ensuring that all groups of pupils currently at the school are making much better progress in English than they have done in the past. For some time, achievement in the sixth form has been slightly above or in line with national averages. However, in 2015, girls in the sixth form did not achieve the same high standards as boys. Leaders have addressed this through implementing more rigorous tracking systems which reliably indicate improved performance in A level and AS level for all students.

Wheatley Park School not only has a beautiful campus; it also offers a welcoming and inclusive community. Sixth formers and younger pupils are rightly proud of their school; they confidently welcome visitors, are proud to share their work and recognise that their school is improving. Most pupils have responded well to recent initiatives to improve the standard of behaviour. The school's shared core values nurture strong working relationships between staff and pupils. Consequently, all pupils' pastoral and welfare needs are given careful support alongside their academic requirements.

The quality of teaching and assessment is well led and managed and so has improved. You have worked with teachers to identify 'four key habits' which exemplify good teaching, together with a shared strategy for providing pupils with feedback on their work. These common approaches are used well by most teachers and they underpin improvements to teaching and learning. As a result, most teachers design and deliver interesting lessons and many use probing questioning to good effect to promote deeper thinking and reflection. Where this happens, teachers ensure a swift pace of learning, pupils know their targets and high-quality work in their books demonstrates the progress that pupils make over time. Despite these improvements, leaders and governors are aware that more needs to be done to ensure that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in a minority of key stage 3 lessons is consistently as good as the best practice in the school.

Pupils eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funding to support disadvantaged pupils) have not achieved as well as their peers in the past. Leaders and governors rightly see improving the performance of this group as an urgent priority and there remains more to be done to close these gaps. The steps that leaders are currently taking to improve the progress of this group are being successful, particularly at key stage 3.

Attendance remains just below the national average. You are aware that the attendance of some groups, including those eligible for the pupil premium and some pupils who have special educational needs or disability, needs to be better. You have successfully introduced a range of initiatives which are beginning to improve the overall attendance figures and reduce these gaps.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, your staff and governors appropriately place a very high emphasis on pupils' safety and welfare. The staff vetting record, known as the single central record, is well maintained and detailed records are kept. All adults who work with pupils are checked appropriately and staff have received relevant and regular training on safeguarding.

Leaders have ensured that policies and guidelines on all relevant aspects of safeguarding are in place and clearly steer the very good practice in the school, fostering a caring culture of vigilance. Regular communication between key staff and other agencies ensures timely and effective support for pupils of concern and reviews the impact of actions already taken.

Through the planned curriculum, pupils learn about how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. Pupils and sixth formers feel safe here and trust that members of staff are always available for them to share any concerns.

Inspection findings

- You give the school clear, purposeful and strategic leadership. Leaders' vision for improving teaching and learning through focusing on 'four key habits' is shared by the whole staff. Having this common approach has led to improved lesson planning and sharing of best practice by teachers. Consequently, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved.
- You have worked closely with leaders from the River Learning Trust and colleagues from other schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to refine systems for managing behaviour. Good working relationships between governors, leaders and the RLT have ensured that good practice has already been shared between Wheatley Park School and other schools in the trust prior to the school formally joining the RLT later this term.
- Governors form a dedicated and effective team and they exercise good strategic oversight of the work of the school. They offer wise and insightful challenge to you and your senior team. Working with governors, you have wisely broadened and strengthened the senior leadership team in order to increase capacity in preparation for your retirement at the end of this year.
- You have ensured that leaders have responded well to the areas for improvement identified during the previous inspection. Working in partnership with the RLT, you have ensured that regular coaching and training opportunities have led to shared ideas and resources, staff development and improvements to outcomes. You recognise that further work is required to ensure that all teaching becomes as effective as the strongest practice already in the school.
- Leaders make very effective use of performance information in key stages 4 and 5 to accurately monitor the school's performance and inform appropriate actions for school improvement planning. Detailed analysis of this information enables them to coordinate highly effective targeted interventions, which accelerate pupils' progress. However, due to a new curriculum and assessments introduced this year, the analysis of performance information for key stage 3 is not so effective. Consequently, senior leaders do not have as clear a vision of the current progress of different groups of pupils. Leaders recognise that improvements are needed to ensure that they can consistently challenge teachers to maximise progress for all groups of pupils in the younger year groups.
- By the end of key stage 4, standards in most subjects in 2015 were above or in line with the national average. This was especially the case for mathematics and science, where pupils made exceptional progress. Pupils' progress in English was weaker in 2015, but improved teaching for pupils currently at the school means that this is no longer the case. Current pupils in Year 11 make good progress in English, mathematics and across the curriculum.

- The sixth form is well led and ensures that the requirements of the 16–19 study pathways are met. Last year, although the overall progress made by students following A-level courses was in line with national averages, girls made less progress than boys. Leaders subsequently improved their tracking systems, and regular assessments indicate that this is no longer the case; girls are making strong progress. Leaders are aware that although work experience is offered in Year 12, students would benefit from more opportunities to engage in work-related learning to refine their skills in preparation for the world of work.
- Sixth-form students are very positive about the provision and speak highly of the support and extra guidance that their teachers give them. One sixth former told an inspector that the sixth-form team is, 'incredible, they are always there to support you'. Students play an active part in the life of the school, willingly acting as student leaders to support tutor groups and getting involved in organising a range of annual events and charity fund-raising.
- Leaders set high targets and the majority of teachers ensure that the most able pupils are regularly challenged through tasks that promote deep thinking and evaluation and link different topics. An example was seen in a Year 11 science lesson, where the most able pupils were given the confidence to engage with, and successfully complete, high-level test questions. As a result, these pupils develop very high aspirations, together with the knowledge and skills to achieve them.
- The school has invested in extra staffing and a range of resources to support disadvantaged pupils. In the past, English results showed that disadvantaged pupils made less progress than their peers and other pupils nationally by the end of Year 11. This is no longer the case, and a range of interventions and in-class support for disadvantaged pupils ensures that this group now makes similar progress as other pupils nationally in both English and mathematics. Leaders are aware that more needs to be done to ensure that the gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are completely eradicated.
- The support offered to pupils who have special educational needs or disability is well matched to their particular need and their progress and welfare are routinely reviewed. Bespoke, small-group intervention classes are particularly effective in Year 7 and Year 10 and enable pupils who have special educational needs or disability to make rapid progress. Teaching assistants are very effective at supporting these pupils in class, so that they can participate fully in lessons. As a result, this group makes good progress over time.
- Senior leaders regularly evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in lessons to identify strengths and priorities quickly. They have rightly prioritised ensuring that all teachers improve the quality of feedback that they give their pupils. For example, in a Year 11 physics lesson, detailed analysis of pupils' prior answers to specific exam-style questions enabled the teacher to craft a highly focused and challenging revision session. As a result, all pupils were actively engaged in seeking to improve the quality of their extended written answers.

- Most teachers have high expectations and use their good subject and assessment knowledge to design stimulating lessons. They focus clearly on pupils' intended learning. Teachers in English and humanities give precise feedback and guidance to pupils, who then use this to improve their work. Inspectors witnessed how several teachers use questioning and discussion very effectively to probe and develop pupils' understanding. Where all of these activities take place regularly, pupils' books evidence how they make good progress in lessons and over time. In a minority of lessons in non-core subjects, such as some of the French, media studies and geography lessons seen, teachers' expectations were not as high and the pace of learning was slower.
- Leaders are passionate about wanting the best for every pupil, and pastoral support is well coordinated and effective. Staff inspire and challenge the pupils and communicate well with parents. The school's 'learning zones' system has recently been updated to challenge and support improvements to behaviour. Although exclusion figures are still too high, case studies clearly evidence the recent impact of these systems, and leaders are currently reviewing provision to increase its effectiveness still further.
- Behaviour is good: pupils are polite and friendly, and most of them continue to conduct themselves very well in lessons and around the school site. They value their learning and play a full part in lessons. When challenged, many can offer thoughtful and reflective contributions to group and whole-class discussions. For example, in a Year 7 English lesson, the teacher expertly ensured that all pupils were drawn into the stimulating class discussion. As a result, the pupils clearly gained self-confidence and were able to accurately assess the relative strengths and weaknesses in their own work and that of their peers.
- In a minority of lessons, particularly at key stage 3, behaviour and engagement are not as impressive. In these lessons, not all pupils receive the challenge they need to maintain their interest or keep them fully focused on their work. Where this happens, some pupils can slow the pace of learning with chatter or silly, off-task behaviour.
- Pupils report that they feel safe and happy at the school and most parents who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, agreed. While a small minority of parents expressed concerns about bullying, records show that the few incidents that occur are usually relationship based and the school operates robust monitoring and swift responses. Pupils told inspectors that they are confident to discuss any concerns that they may have with a member of staff.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching becomes as consistently good and challenging for all pupils as the best examples presently in the school

- gaps between the attendance and achievement of pupils eligible for the pupil premium and pupils who have special educational needs or disability, and others in school, continue to close rapidly
- students in the sixth form gain a broader range of work-related learning to develop their enterprise and employment skills.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's Services for Oxfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors visited 12 lessons in the school, and looked at learning jointly with senior leaders. We visited tutor times, spoke with pupils in lessons and looked at some of their work as well as meeting with pupils and sixth formers both formally and informally. Meetings were held with governors, senior leaders, middle leaders and the chief executive of the River Learning Trust. Documentary evidence, including policies, strategic planning documents and analyses of pupils' achievements, were evaluated. We also scrutinised documents relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance, and records of governing body meetings. I also evaluated the responses of 94 parents to the online Parent View survey, as well as responses to staff and pupil questionnaires.