

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Anthony Sharpe
Headteacher
St Bernard's High School
Milton Road
Westcliff-on-Sea
Essex
SS0 7JS

Dear Mr Sharpe

Short inspection of St Bernard's High School

Following my visit to the school on 5 October 2016, with Anne Pepper, 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 June 2012.

This school continues to be good.

Working together, you and your leadership team have sustained and improved the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. During the inspection, you told me how, in a significant period of change, prior to your appointment in January 2016, your deputy headteacher kept the school on track. In the short time since then, you have been successful in galvanising a shared determination, to build on previous successes and to secure continuous improvement across all key stages. The commitment to ensure that all pupils achieve as well as they can is evident in the purposeful atmosphere that pervades every aspect of school life.

Under your leadership, the vision for improvement, and the journey to becoming an outstanding school, is clear. As a result, the school's self-evaluation of its own performance is open and accurate. Staff are clear about what is going well and what needs to be changed. This culture of high expectations of staff and pupils' performance is promoted very effectively by the senior leadership team.

Staff are encouraged to work together to share good practice. Checks on the quality of teaching and learning are regular. You and other senior leaders are working closely with middle leaders to ensure that reviews of teachers' performance are accurate and focused on the things that need to improve. Up-to-date information on pupils' progress is used effectively to identify areas for improvement within subject departments and for individual members of staff.

Under your leadership, there is a strong focus on accountability, at all levels, for ensuring that pupils, of all abilities, do as well as they can. Revised systems are helping leaders and managers to better understand the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning across subjects and key stages. The information gathered is used to provide personalised programmes of professional development to help staff to improve aspects of their teaching further.

The school is welcoming and inclusive. Older students are excellent role models. It is not hard to understand why so many parents of recently arrived Year 7 pupils say how well and how quickly their children have settled in. As reflected in the comments of one parent, 'I am delighted with the welcome and induction that my child has received. She is happy and settled after just four weeks.'

Because of the ethos that you and your staff have created, it was no surprise that pupils were eager to talk to us about their work and their time in school. Working relationships between pupils and staff are very strong. As a result, the school is a pleasant place to learn. Respect for each other and tolerance of individual differences are central features of the learning community.

Robust leadership and increasingly effective teaching have ensured that outcomes in key stages 3 and 4 are typically very strong. In 2015, many pupils made significantly better progress than other pupils nationally. Progress in modern foreign languages was not as strong but it is improving. Evidence seen in lessons, pupils' work and in the school's assessment information indicates that many pupils continue to achieve very well across most subjects.

Outcomes for students in the sixth form are not yet as strong as for pupils at the end of key stage 4. The sixth form leader and teachers are working hard to embed further high aspirations of what students can achieve across all subjects. While there are still some variations between subjects, outcomes overall in the sixth form are improving. During the inspection, sixth formers spoke to inspectors proudly and confidently about their work. They know they need to focus strongly on taking responsibility for their own learning, managing their time and organising their work. Students told inspectors that they feel well supported. Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan learning carefully. Students receive good-quality careers information, advice and guidance. As a result, the overwhelming majority continue into further education, employment or training.

Safeguarding is effective.

Because of the high priority given to safeguarding by you, your staff and governors, St Bernard's pupils feel safe. Records related to the vetting and recruitment of staff are completed systematically. Governors make routine checks to ensure that the information gathered is complete and compliant with statutory regulations.

The required training to keep children safe, for example training in e-safety and the government's 'Prevent' duty, to counter potential radicalisation, is in place and

regularly updated. As a result, all staff, senior leaders and governors are fully aware of what they need to do if a child protection concern arises.

It is clear from your tracking information that swift action is taken to protect vulnerable pupils from harm. Staff with specific responsibility for child protection work closely with staff from other agencies to ensure that appropriate support is secured. Quite rightly, senior leaders are not afraid to challenge in cases where external actions are perceived to be too slow.

In their meetings with inspectors, pupils and students explained how the school helps them to understand how to stay safe in different situations, including when online. The overwhelming majority of parents agree that their children are safe and well cared for. Pupils know about different types of bullying. Inspectors agreed with them when they said that this is an unusual occurrence at school and, if it were to occur, they are confident that it would be dealt with swiftly.

Inspection findings

- You, senior and middle leaders and governors are taking effective action to secure the consistency of outcomes across all subjects, for all groups and across all key stages. Governors are confident that they have the information they need to challenge leaders to secure further improvement. As a result, pupils' progress across key stages 3 and 4 is strong. Typically, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make similar progress to other pupils nationally. The pupil premium additional funding is used effectively to ensure that all pupils who receive it do as well as they should.
- GCSE outcomes in mathematics, modern foreign languages and science have improved since the previous inspection. In modern foreign languages, steps have been taken to address previously much weaker progress than in other subjects. New languages have been introduced, for example Spanish and Italian, and teaching strengthened further. Increased opportunities for students to take a GCSE in their home language makes a positive contribution to the school's above average attainment in the English Baccalaureate.
- In the sixth form, although students' progress is improving, it is not as rapid as it is at key stages 3 and 4. As a result, working closely with senior leaders and the head of department, you are taking steps to ensure that all sixth form students achieve their potential. For example, a review of the sixth form curriculum is underway. This aims to ensure that a wider range of courses are accessible for students who have not achieved the higher levels at GCSE. More time is available, from this year, for the teaching of A level subjects. Teachers' focus, on supervised study time in the sixth form and ensuring good attendance, has been strengthened further.
- Year 7 pupils settle in very quickly at the start of the new school year.

This is because of the excellent support they receive to help smooth the transition from primary to secondary education. For example, through the visits that St Bernard's staff make to the primary settings and a summer school for new starters. Assessment information from the primary stage and in school is used well to provide early interventions and extra support for pupils who need extra help. An accelerated reader programme is offered to all Year 7 pupils. The additional catch-up funding, provided to schools to help Year 7 pupils make a good start, is used effectively. For example, in mathematics, to give one-to-one support for those pupils who need more time to reach the standard expected at this stage.

- The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last inspection. However, in some lessons, in particular in the sixth form, teachers do not provide the most able pupils, consistently, with work that is challenging enough to ensure that they make rapid progress across all subjects.
- Middle leaders have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They say that they feel valued and encouraged to contribute to whole-school improvement, as well as improving work in their own departments. They welcome the increased opportunities which you and senior leaders offer to share good practice and good ideas. Regular reviews of teaching, learning and pupils' progress are in place, with follow-up programmes of professional development for individual teachers.
- You and senior leaders give good consideration to succession planning. Middle leaders are given access to appropriate leadership training. The good links you have established with initial teacher training providers are helping to support the recruitment of new teachers. For example, in shortage subjects, such as religious education, mathematics, modern foreign languages and science.
- The standard of pupils' behaviour, in lessons and around the school, is very high. The systems designed to promote good behaviour are applied consistently. The effectiveness of these systems is monitored closely by your leadership team. In the rare cases, where help is needed to improve behaviour, support is tailored to match individual pupils' needs. The impact of this support is evaluated, in regular pastoral meetings, to ensure that interventions are working.
- Pupils are polite, articulate and proud of their school. They readily take on leadership responsibilities which help to prepare them for the next stage in their education. The school's atmosphere is calm and purposeful. The principles of British values are promoted effectively, in lessons and across the wider curriculum. Pupils know right from wrong. Tolerance and respect are inherent in the culture and ethos of the school. The very good working relationships established between staff and pupils make a significant contribution to the high standards of behaviour sustained over time.
- The vast majority of pupils attend school regularly. There is a clear process for tracking and monitoring attendance. The impact of follow-up

actions to improve weaker attendance is evaluated to ensure that systems are working effectively.

- Sixth form students are confident and look professional. They know that they are well-supported and understand how education prepares them for future study and employment. These are some of the reasons why so many stay on at school and complete their courses. Effective careers information, advice and guidance, available across all key stages, helps them to prepare for the next steps in education and/or training. Many students go on to study at university and more of them are now giving consideration to taking apprenticeship routes to employment.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the progress of students in the sixth form matches, more closely, the strong progress that pupils make at key stage 4
- teaching at all stages, in particular in the sixth form, provides sufficient challenge to extend learning to the highest level so that all students, including the most able, achieve as well as they can

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Brentwood, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Southend-on-Sea. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you; senior leaders; middle leaders; the chair and vice chair of governors and two groups of pupils and sixth form students. I also held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. Inspectors observed pupils in lessons and looked at their work in books. Several of the visits to lessons were carried out jointly with school leaders. Inspectors spoke with pupils at break and lunchtime. In addition, they reviewed a range of documents, including those relating to governance, safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and the schools' self-evaluation and planning. Inspectors considered responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also took account of the views expressed in the parents' free text responses received on the day of inspection.

Inspectors' key lines of enquiry during the inspection focused on: the impact of senior leaders' actions to secure the consistency of outcomes across all subjects; the effectiveness of the work of middle leaders in improving teaching across all key stages and groups, including for the most able; whether the very high standards of behaviour and good attendance seen at the last inspection have been sustained; the effectiveness of the implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes and the school's careers information, advice and guidance.