

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Miss Mary Utton
Headteacher
Plymouth High School for Girls
St Lawrence Road
Plymouth
Devon
PL4 6HT

Dear Miss Utton

Short inspection of Plymouth High School for Girls

Following my visit to the school on 9 November 2016 with Deborah Wring, 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 September 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, senior leaders and governors have a common and accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The school development plan is sharply focused to address the identified priorities and work is under way on most of these.

There have been a large number of changes since the last inspection, not least that the number of senior and middle leaders has reduced. The governing body has been reconstituted to better match the needs of the school with the professional skills and expertise of governors. You have restructured the curriculum to give pupils more choice and ensure that they have the same opportunities as other pupils nationally.

You have addressed all the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. You have arranged a wide range of training for staff which is having a very positive impact, such as in better questioning of pupils to improve their understanding. Improvements in the quality of teaching in the sixth form have brought about better outcomes for students in most subjects. You are very aware of the small number of subjects where there has not been the same level of improvement. Your senior leaders are focusing their efforts to support middle leaders in these subjects to raise standards. Students currently in the sixth form are making better progress than previous cohorts.

Your work to sharpen teachers' assessment has had a positive effect and pupils' work in key stage 4 shows that they are achieving higher standards, although they are not high enough for some of the most able pupils. Teachers' assessment of pupils' attainment, in almost all subjects, is accurate. With national changes to GCSE and A-level qualifications, there is work to do to consolidate the best practice and implement a consistent assessment system across the school to take these changes into account. Some pupils and many parents who responded to Parent View commented that the current assessment systems are confusing.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are safe. Your leaders who have specific safeguarding responsibilities are very clear about their roles and responsibilities. They have fostered very strong relationships with other agencies to support pupils and their families.

The student support facility, 'A01', along with the well-crafted personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme, is helping pupils develop their resilience and support their personal well-being. This is valued highly by pupils and their parents. As one parent, typifying many, wrote, 'I feel my daughter is happy, safe and is encouraged to have ideas and become involved in the world around her.'

Governors have carefully allocated the resources needed for additional investment in services to support pupils' well-being and improvements to the security of the site. As a result, pupils feel safer both in and out of school.

The very small number of pupils who attend alternative provision, at Cornwall College Saltash and ACE Schools Plymouth, are able to follow courses which help their personal development. Leaders keep a careful eye on the progress the pupils make, their attendance and behaviour.

Inspection findings

- Disadvantaged pupils are achieving better outcomes. The differences between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are diminishing rapidly. School data and work seen show that most of the disadvantaged pupils currently in Year 11 are achieving as well as other pupils and some are doing better. This is a significant improvement from the 2016 results, where disadvantaged pupils' GCSE results were almost one grade lower than their peers, from the same starting points. Much of this is due to the higher profile you have given to this group and teachers' greater awareness. You have successfully addressed the historic low take-up of the English Baccalaureate by disadvantaged pupils. The most able disadvantaged pupils who were entered for the English Baccalaureate in 2016 all achieved it.
- The most able pupils are working at higher levels in key stage 4 and in the sixth form. Pupils show well-developed thinking skills in history, psychology

and politics which help them to achieve the highest grades. Pupils in English in key stages 3 and 4 take an analytical approach to their work which helps them formulate views and infer meaning. While there are many strengths, the expectations of the most able pupils across subjects are inconsistent. The proportions of pupils on track to achieve the very highest grades at GCSE and A level are still too low. Inspectors observed that this is often due to the teachers not planning learning which challenges pupils sufficiently to reach the top grades. For example, in mathematics, there are too few opportunities for pupils to solve problems which let them demonstrate their understanding of mathematical concepts and apply their learning. You have identified the progress of the most able pupils as a priority in the current school development plan and leaders have already arranged staff training to address the issue.

- Over recent years some subject areas have not performed as well as the majority. Science has been in such a position, but work seen and lesson observations show an improving picture even though there is still some inconsistency in teachers' expectations. However, pupils commented that the careers advice they receive in science is helping them to prepare well for further study, particularly in the fields of medicine, nursing and veterinary medicine.
- Progress in languages is not strong. The standards being achieved in French and Spanish are too low. Work in French is often too easy and does not build on pupils' learning in primary school. Teachers do not challenge pupils sufficiently to ensure accuracy and precision in their choice of vocabulary and their use of tenses. Progress is much stronger in Italian.
- The changes to assessment nationally have not been encompassed yet in a coherent system across school. You and senior leaders are acutely aware of the need to rapidly develop an assessment system that teachers are confident in and that pupils and their parents understand. Pilot projects are under way but you agree that these need to be brought to a speedy conclusion so that a single system can be implemented as soon as possible. This is particularly important as pupils, particularly in key stage 4, do not understand how well they are doing or what they need to do to improve. Teachers' feedback does not always help them to identify and address gaps in what they know and understand. Equally, parents are confused. Some of those who responded to Parent View expressed concern that they cannot help their child to improve as much as they would like.
- Pupils are very aware of the risks they may face in society, including sexual exploitation, extremism and from substance abuse, as a result of the school's work. The systems to support their personal development, including their emotional and mental health, are advanced.
- Governors are clear about their roles in the many facets of safeguarding and pupils' safety. They use their professional expertise to good effect in this important work. They have allocated additional funds to employ more welfare staff to strengthen this aspect of the school's work further. This is resulting in better attendance and improved pupils' progress. There are, however, a small number of administrative areas of safeguarding which need to be tightened. These do not compromise the school's work, which is

highly effective, but amendments are needed to reflect the good practice that was seen during the inspection.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the progress the most able pupils make in all years continues to improve so that more of them achieve the highest grades
- the quality of teaching in languages improves so that pupils make better progress, particularly in French and Spanish
- a coherent assessment system which is understood well by teachers, pupils and parents is implemented urgently.

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

Yours sincerely

Iain Freeland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors observed learning in classrooms and visited the canteen and sixth form common room to observe pupils' behaviour. Many of the lesson observations were carried out jointly with senior leaders. We looked at pupils' work and talked to them about their learning. Inspectors looked at a sample of books from pupils across the school and heard Year 8 pupils, of differing abilities, read. We met with three groups of pupils from different years to talk about their experience of school. Meetings were held with senior leaders, staff with specific safeguarding responsibilities and seven governors. I also spoke with the head of school improvement from the local authority. I scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's own evaluation and development plan, safeguarding and child protection records and the school's assessment information. Inspectors took into account the views of 120 parents who responded to Parent View and the 70 staff and 361 pupils who expressed their views through Ofsted's online questionnaires.

This short inspection focused on:

- the school's work to improve the attainment of the most able pupils
- the quality of teaching in the sciences and languages
- differences in progress between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils

- the effectiveness of the school's assessment systems to improve outcomes
- whether safeguarding was still effective and pupils were safe.