

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Kylie Storey
Headteacher
Balliol Lower School
Balliol Road
Kempston
Bedford
Bedfordshire
MK42 7ER

Dear Mrs Storey

Short inspection of Balliol Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 17 January 2017, 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 July 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. You are determined to provide pupils with a good-quality education and this commitment has ensured a clear focus on continual improvement throughout the school. Staff and governors are prepared to 'go the extra mile' in order to ensure that pupils' needs are met, even where such needs provide considerable challenges. As a result, the school has become a haven for many children – the place that they can rely on to provide them with safety, security and the reassurance of routine.

You have created a highly inclusive school where all pupils are welcomed and valued. Pupils are taught that all people are equally valuable and that they should not judge others on, for example, the colour of their skin or their religion. As a result, pupils develop good attitudes that prepare them well for life in modern British society.

You and the school's governors have ensured that the areas for improvement from the previous inspection have been tackled effectively. You have focused strongly on improving the quality of teaching in the school and the results of this are clear. You and other leaders regularly check to ensure that the quality of teaching in the school is at least good. You use the services of an external consultant to gain an additional perspective as to whether the quality of teaching is good and improving.

The school is in the process of extending its age range to become a full primary school. This means that pupils who are currently in Year 4 will be able to choose to stay on into Year 5 in September 2017, rather than transferring to middle schools as they have done previously. Four additional classrooms are being built in order to accommodate the additional pupils. You are managing the building work very well and have not allowed the work involved in changing to become a primary school to distract you from ensuring that the school continues to improve.

Although the school is improving, and leaders and governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, self-evaluation and improvement planning are not fully developed. As a result, the speed of improvement in the school is not as rapid as it could be.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and well kept. The school's single central record of employment checks meets statutory requirements. Procedures to ensure that only suitable people are employed to work with children are suitably robust. The school's leaders and staff know pupils and their families very well. As a result, they are particularly alert to the possible indicators of abuse or neglect in individual children.

Pupils feel safe at school. You have created a very open culture in which pupils feel able to share their concerns with the adults in the school. They have great confidence that staff will 'sort out' any problems that arise. Virtually all of the parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, said that they feel that their children are safe at school. Pupils have been taught about bullying and show a good understanding of what it is and is not. They have been taught to tell if bullying happens and they have confidence that staff will take them seriously and address the issue if they do.

Inspection findings

- In order to check whether the school remains good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. The first was to ask whether disadvantaged pupils who are currently at the school are making good progress in a wide range of subjects. The reason for looking at this area was that the results of the key stage 1 national assessments in 2016 showed that disadvantaged pupils at Balliol achieved less well than other pupils nationally.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in this year group is well above the national average. Similarly, the proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in this year group is much higher than the national average. In many cases, pupils belong to both of these groups. These pupils are well supported and taught well. As a result, they are making good progress from their individual starting points.
- The school's governors ensure that disadvantaged pupils are given a high priority. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils has increased, as has the extent of

personal need, since the previous inspection. The progress that pupils make is tracked very closely and monitored regularly. Leaders use this information effectively to ensure that pupils are given the right support to enable them to achieve well. As a result, it is clear that disadvantaged pupils make good progress throughout the school.

- The second area that I looked at was whether boys do less well than girls at Balliol Lower School. The published results for 2016 show a wide gap in attainment between boys and girls, with girls outperforming boys in reading, writing and mathematics. This was not the case in previous years. The school's assessment information and the work in pupils' exercise books show clearly that this result is specific to this group of pupils rather than being indicative of a wider problem or trend.
- The third key line of enquiry was whether phonics is taught effectively and whether pupils make good progress in this area. The published data shows that the proportion of pupils that reached the expected level in the Year 1 phonics screening check was below the national average in 2016. However, it also shows a clear upward trend from a very low starting point in 2013.
- The school's leaders have taken effective action to tackle the previous weaknesses in phonics teaching. As a result, results are now much closer to the national average and are predicted to be in line with the most recent national figure in 2017. Pupils read well and use their knowledge of phonics effectively to help them to work out unfamiliar words. They blend sounds together competently to read words, and separate the sounds in words in order to spell. This is because teachers provide them with plentiful opportunities to practise and develop these skills.
- Finally, I looked at rates of attendance and, specifically, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and boys. Previously, these groups have had particularly high rates of absence, including persistent absence. This is no longer the case. You have ensured that attendance is given a high priority in the school and a range of appropriate measures are now in place to ensure that no groups or individuals are held back by low attendance. The school's leaders take a direct role in addressing attendance issues; for example, senior leaders personally phone parents when pupils do not turn up for school.
- The school's leaders and governors know the school well. You evaluate the school's strengths and weaknesses and plan for future improvement. However, these processes are not fully developed. The school's self-evaluation document is overly descriptive and not sufficiently analytical. This means that it is not fully effective in ensuring that improvement plans focus well on the most important areas. The school development plan is long, which limits its use as an effective working document. The separate plans that sit below the overall plan are not sufficiently sharply focused to bring about rapid improvement. Targets are not as clear as they could be and the plans lack measurable success criteria and clear milestones that mark out the necessary steps to achieve longer-term goals.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- Strengthen leadership and management further so that the school improves at a more rapid rate by ensuring that:
 - self-evaluation is analytical and appropriately self-critical
 - school improvement planning focuses sharply on the most important areas, with measurable success criteria and appropriate deadlines and milestones.
- Manage the transition to becoming a full primary school carefully, maintaining a particular focus on outcomes for pupils so that:
 - all pupils continue to make good progress
 - pupils make sufficient progress during upper key stage 2 to ensure that results in the national tests in 2019 are at least in line with the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

Wendy Varney
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders and a group of governors. I met with the school council and spoke with other pupils during the day. I met with a representative of the local authority in person and spoke with another on the telephone. I took into account the 51 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and 24 responses to the staff survey. I observed teaching and learning in lessons jointly with you and one of the assistant headteachers. I looked at pupils' books and scrutinised a range of school documents.