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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ms Tracey Trusler
Principal
Wilmington Academy
Common Lane
Wilmington
Kent
DA2 7DR

Dear Ms Trusler

Short inspection of Wilmington Academy

Following my visit to the school on 21 February 2017 with Debbie Godfrey-Phaure, 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

You and your leadership team have maintained a good quality of education since the last inspection. You are ambitious and passionate about pupils being provided with the best educational opportunities. You have ensured that leaders share your vision for a caring and inclusive school where pupils are well prepared for adult life. Many become the first from their family to attend university. You value the support from Leigh Academies Trust. This includes help with the recruitment of teachers and governors, leadership support and development, and monitoring and scrutiny to ensure that the school can offer high-quality provision to all its learners. This support is particularly evident through the trust providing school welfare officers to engage with parents and pupils regarding absence.

You have developed a vertical tutoring and college system, in which the whole school is broken into smaller 'colleges'. Pupils and staff informed inspectors that they value the benefits this system provides, stating that it is operated well to support the behaviour and academic performance of the pupils more effectively. The introduction of a keyring presented to pupils after each term, which shows their individual subject results, is also highly valued by the pupils and has helped in developing their understanding of how well they are performing academically.

You and your leadership team are taking effective action to address the weaknesses in outcomes identified from last year. For example, the new tracking system for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, implemented this academic year, is already leading to improved outcomes. It has enabled the newly appointed special educational needs coordinator and teaching assistants to identify areas of underperformance and provide more targeted support within lessons. Leaders are using the tracking system to evaluate the impact of this support better. Where pupils have started school without the necessary literacy and numeracy skills, leaders have developed effective programmes to support them. As a result of these programmes, you have been able to improve the reading ages of many pupils, although for disadvantaged pupils the progress has not been as rapid. You have identified other specific areas that need to improve; for example, you are planning to work in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation as part of a pilot, to develop the oracy skills of Year 7 pupils.

In the previous inspection report, you were asked to raise students' achievement in the sixth form so that significantly more gained the higher grades at A level. This continues to be a priority for you. Results from the last academic year show that students with higher GCSE grades did not go on to consistently achieve the higher grades at A level. Students' current progress indicates that this will improve this summer.

The previous report also asked you to ensure that all teaching is consistently good, enabling pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning and making them think for themselves more often. You have rightly identified that this remains a focus. The quality of challenge for the most able pupils continues to be inconsistent across different subjects. Some teachers do not provide enough challenge to enable all pupils to think more deeply and be sufficiently secure in their knowledge and understanding, in order that they make really rapid progress.

Leaders, in consultation with governors, have taken strategic decisions to develop the curriculum at both key stages 4 and in the sixth form. You are introducing the International Baccalaureate career-related programme in the sixth form as you believe this better meets the needs of some students and their future aspirations. You are clear that this, instead of A levels, will be more appropriate for some students who wish to engage in career-related learning. Following the recent changes in some vocational courses at key stage 4, you have changed the courses pupils are studying, so that they better match the skills and abilities of the pupils studying them.

You have rightly identified that the attendance of some pupils needs to improve. Pastoral leaders have introduced new initiatives, such as the breakfast club. These new initiatives are having a positive impact and attendance is improving. Leaders recognise that attendance needs to be higher for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The number of exclusions was previously too high but has reduced as a result of the actions taken by strong pastoral teams within the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, supported by the trust, ensure that all safeguarding arrangements meet requirements. All records are suitably detailed and the checks undertaken are thorough and updated regularly. The governor responsible for safeguarding visits the school termly to check that the appropriate systems are in place and up to date. Leaders are aware that newly appointed governors require further training.

Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe and that bullying is not tolerated anywhere in the school. Through the college pastoral system, any incidents that might occur are dealt with promptly. Pupils have respect for one another and are calm and courteous to each other and adults around the school and in lessons. Appropriate provision and support are provided to pupils who have disabilities so that they are fully integrated into the school.

Inspection findings

- Improvements have been made in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Teaching is not yet outstanding because not all teachers make maximum use of lesson time and check pupils' understanding systematically and effectively. Some teachers do not provide pupils with sufficient opportunities to develop their skills of extended writing or to master their knowledge and understanding of the curriculum.
- School leaders recognised that attendance rates, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, were lower than national averages. You have made this a priority for improvement this academic year. The attendance officer and student support manager for each college work closely to respond rapidly when pupils are late or absent from school. Steps taken, such as contacting families immediately, have helped to reduce the absence rate, although attendance for some pupils needs to improve further. Pupils recognise that 'absence is strictly dealt with'.
- Last year, fixed-term exclusions were higher than national averages for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They have reduced this academic year. The restructuring of teaching assistants' work has enabled the special educational needs coordinator to better support pupils so they feel more engaged in lessons and do not fall behind.
- Since September, leaders have used the assessment system effectively to identify those pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities who are falling behind. The special educational needs coordinator identifies pupils' learning needs quickly and deploys teaching assistants more effectively to help improve pupils' progress. Teachers use information and communication technology effectively to share resources designed to better support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- In lessons and around the school site, particularly at break- and lunchtime, pupils behave very respectfully towards one another and to adults. They take pride in their school and their uniforms.

- Leaders have successfully adapted the curriculum, having worked effectively with a governor with expertise in this area. Leaders recognised that the curriculum did not meet the needs of all pupils at key stage 4 or in the sixth form, particularly for students who want to follow a more career-related/vocational pathway. The curriculum has now been revised to help enable students to study vocational-based courses and make better progress.
- Sixth-form students are highly ambitious and clear about the plans for their future destinations, whether that is to go to university or apply for an apprenticeship. The school has provided effective advice and guidance to ensure that students are able to make the most appropriate choices for themselves.
- Leaders fully understand the need to improve the numeracy and literacy skills of disadvantaged pupils. Not all of the barriers to learning for these pupils have been clearly identified. Leaders have not yet developed a clear rationale for the strategies that have been adopted.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- continue the work already started to improve the levels of consistency in teaching, learning and assessment across the curriculum
- sharpen their focus on raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, including those that leave primary school at the expected standard as well as the most able disadvantaged pupils
- further improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, so their attendance is in line with national levels for other pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Kearsey
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the short inspection, we met you and members of your senior team, the chief executive and deputy chief executive of Leigh Academies Trust, and the chair and one other member of the local governing body. We met with leaders for behaviour, attendance and safeguarding. We also spoke to groups of pupils across different year groups. We joined senior leaders in observations of lessons, and, together with middle leaders, we looked at pupils' work over time. We evaluated information on pupils' attainment and progress across all year groups in the school. We also looked at records of attendance, of pupils' behaviour, and the records about keeping pupils safe. We considered 67 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, and 43 free-text responses.