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Mr Geraint Edwards
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Dear Mr Edwards

Short inspection of The Priory School

Following my visit to the school on 28 February 2017 with Paul Copping, 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 previous inspection.

You and your senior leadership team have demonstrated determined and dedicated leadership. This has ensured that the school has consolidated and enhanced the strengths identified at the previous inspection, and worked successfully to address the areas for improvement which were identified then. The strength of leadership at the school is recognised overwhelmingly by pupils, staff and parents alike. They are particularly appreciative of the way that school leaders have created a highly inclusive school, where there are consistently high expectations of what all pupils can achieve.

The overall progress made by pupils has improved since the previous inspection. In 2016 the progress made by pupils overall at key stage 4 was significantly higher than the progress made by pupils on average nationally. You have also secured much greater consistency in achievement across the whole curriculum, and pupils now achieve well in a wide range of subject areas. For example, at the time of the previous inspection, outcomes in science lagged behind those achieved in other crucial subjects such as English and mathematics. Pupils are now making progress in science which is in line with that made in other subjects. The progress made by pupils in the sixth form, in both academic and vocational subjects, has continued to improve.

Standards of teaching have continued to strengthen. Teachers routinely plan lessons which combine relevant and interesting sequences of activities to promote rapid learning. There is a purposeful and productive atmosphere in almost all lessons. Teachers create and sustain overwhelmingly positive, trusting relationships. Pupils listen attentively to teachers' explanations and feel safe to ask and answer questions about their learning.

At the previous inspection, inspectors noted that students were keen to learn and demonstrated positive attitudes. However, they also recommended that there was more that could be done to strengthen pupils' learning skills even further. You have made a good deal of progress in this area through teaching cross-curricular skills, along with dedicated lessons about learning and employability skills. This has helped many pupils to become more effective learners.

Pupils enjoy school. As a result they attend regularly; overall attendance is higher than the national average and persistent absence is lower. Pupils enjoy school because they feel valued and well cared for. School leaders have effectively prioritised the welfare and personal development of pupils. They have helped to create a tolerant community where diversity is valued and where all pupils feel they belong, regardless of race, religion or sexuality. The school is rightly proud of the work that it has undertaken to promote the good mental health of young people.

The school's self-evaluation is accurate and perceptive. School leaders ensure that robust plans are quickly put in place to secure any necessary improvements if weaknesses are identified. For example, school leaders are highly aware that the outcomes achieved by disadvantaged pupils at the school at key stage 4 in 2016 were not as high as they should have been. They have responded with the required urgency to implement a range of strategies to ensure that future outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are at least as strong as they have been in every other year since the previous inspection. However, they are clearly aware that more needs to be done to strengthen the school's provision for disadvantaged pupils still further, particularly as the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school increases over time. They also realise that they need to ensure even greater consistency in how teachers implement certain important school policies.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that there is a culture of safeguarding within the school. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. For example, the single central record is kept up to date and all necessary checks are made when appointing new staff.

Systems for monitoring vulnerable pupils are robust. Pupils feel safe and are confident that poor behaviour, such as bullying, is rare and dealt with effectively if it does occur. The curriculum helps them to understand and manage risks, such as those involving the use of the internet and social networking sites, and pupils are clear that the advice they receive does help shape their behaviour. Staff are quick in

identifying and following up any concerns that they have about individuals. They work effectively with external agencies so that pupils get the help that they need swiftly.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to investigate current standards of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. This is because disadvantaged pupils at key stage 4 in 2016 did not make as much progress as they should.
- School leaders have responded robustly to this decline. They have evaluated the performance of the 2016 cohort meticulously and introduced a range of strategies to accelerate the progress of the disadvantaged pupils currently in the school. These have included improved training for staff, more rigorous and focused processes to check the quality of the school's work and the provision of a greater range of interventions to support those who may have fallen behind throughout the school. The school's current assessment information suggests that these developments will ensure that the progress made by pupils completing key stage 4 in 2017 will be much closer to the national average for other pupils. It will therefore also be more consistently in line with disadvantaged outcomes achieved by the school between 2013 and 2015. Evidence from this inspection is consistent with this evaluation.
- There is still room for the school to sharpen further its provision for disadvantaged pupils. The school ensures that all teachers have detailed knowledge about the individual needs of the disadvantaged pupils in their classes. However, not all teachers routinely convert this knowledge into practical strategies for accelerating their progress. Not all teachers are consistently following expectations contained in the school's policy for teaching disadvantaged pupils, for example that the books of disadvantaged pupils should always be marked before those of their peers. While school leaders are very thorough in their evaluation of the effectiveness of any strategies deployed, they do not always communicate this analysis as effectively as they should to parents through the school website.
- The small number of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities did not perform as well as they should at key stage 4 in 2016. This informed another important focus for this inspection. Once again, school leaders were able to show that they carefully analysed these results and that quality of provision for these pupils has been subsequently strengthened. The school produces detailed individual strategies of support for these pupils; these embody high expectations of what can be achieved. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are extremely well integrated into mainstream classes. Teaching assistants successfully provide focused support in the classroom for targeted pupils while allowing those pupils the opportunity to reach their own answers. The pupils themselves are very appreciative of the support they receive.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities who are currently in the school are making particularly strong progress in English, mathematics and

science. Support for these pupils is not quite as effective outside of these core subjects and so their progress in other subjects is not as rapid.

- The previous inspection report recommended that the school should do more to deepen and broaden pupils' learning skills and so help them to become more effective learners. School leaders have addressed this issue in a number of ways. They have introduced a 'Raising Aspirations' programme which delivers generic employability skills, along with citizenship lessons which also aim to develop key life skills. Teachers routinely promote cross-curricular learning skills within subject-specific lessons and these are also emphasised in tutorial periods and assemblies. The school assessment policy encourages pupils to reflect upon their own work and that of their peers.
- Evidence from this inspection suggests that pupils are now becoming much more confident learners and this is helping to accelerate the progress they make. These skills are particularly well established among the most able pupils.
- Since you joined the school as headteacher in 2013, shortly after the previous inspection, the size of the school and the nature of its intake have started to change. The school is growing: governors have agreed to admit greater numbers of pupils into each year group in key stage 3 than the published pupil admission number. The final line of enquiry for this inspection was therefore to ensure that the leadership of the school has been planning effectively for change.
- Governors were clear that they are maintaining an appropriate strategic oversight on the development of the school; this was borne out in the records of their meetings. A review of other school documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation and the school improvement plan, shows that school leaders are incredibly mindful about the changes described above and are responding appropriately. Evidence from visits to classrooms in every year group demonstrated that pupils of all ability groups continue to make strong progress throughout the school. They are clearly developing key literacy and numeracy skills. When pupils read in class, both the most and the least able readers did so with clarity and confidence.
- An important part of ensuring consistent improvement across the school is how effectively leaders ensure that important school policies and protocols are followed by all teachers. In some cases this has been achieved successfully. For example, the school behaviour policy is applied with a high level of consistency, and this has helped ensure the calm and orderly atmosphere which is evident in all parts of the school. However, leaders have not been able to ensure that school policies and protocols about marking and the presentation of work are followed equally as consistently. As a result, pupils' work over time in some teaching groups is not as well organised or as coherently presented as it should be. This hinders the ability of some pupils to use their written work as a basis for revision.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- strengthen further the school's provision for disadvantaged pupils, particularly ensuring that all teachers convert their thorough understanding of individual pupils' needs into practical classroom strategies which effectively accelerate progress
- effectively monitor the consistency with which staff implement the school's policies and protocols on assessment and the presentation of work.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Lawrence
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, teachers, governors and various groups of pupils. I had a telephone discussion with a representative from the local authority. We observed pupils' learning in a series of short visits to a number of lessons, and all of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team. We scrutinised a range of school documentation, including policies, the minutes of governors' meetings, the school's self-evaluation, the school's improvement plan, safeguarding records and information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance. We considered the views expressed in 247 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, together with 137 questionnaires returned by pupils and 67 returned by school staff.