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26 May 2017

Mr Ian Morris
Headteacher
The Highfield School
Highfield
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Dear Mr Morris

Short inspection of The Highfield School

Following my visit to the school on 27 April 2017 with Ofsted Inspector Duncan Cooper, 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your clear vision, astute leadership and relentless pursuit of improvement have rightly ensured that there is an established culture of high aspirations for all. You and your senior leadership team demonstrated to us that you know your school extremely well and have an accurate picture of where its strengths and weaknesses lie. Although you know that the school remains good, you are not complacent.

Pupils are very proud of their school and enjoy learning. They are courteous, articulate young people who happily welcome visitors to their newly built and exceptionally well-maintained school. They talked enthusiastically with inspectors about its friendliness, and the wide range of enrichment activities provided for them. The environment is a calm and purposeful place in which to learn. Pupils in all year groups talked confidently about their learning, and knew how well they were doing and what they had to do to improve. In lessons and across the school site, pupils move around in a mature and considerate way.

A very large majority of parents who expressed a view said that they would recommend the school to another parent. They agreed that their children are happy, well cared for and safe. One parent expressed the views of many by saying, 'The pastoral side of the school is exemplary and sorts any problem straight away.'

Members of the governing body provide challenge and support to you and your

senior team, scrutinising your work to ensure that you address effectively the remaining areas for development. The work of the governors' committees shows that governors look at a wide range of aspects of the school's work. Between them, they have the necessary skills to accurately evaluate the work of leaders and the impact they are having.

The previous inspection identified the need to further improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and to help pupils develop their independent learning skills. These areas have now been built upon, and are being strengthened further by providing personalised support and greater opportunities for independent learning.

The impact of the school's work was clearly evident in the 2016 GCSE results. You are rightly proud of the impressive overall progress made by pupils, which was significantly above the national average in 2016. The progress that disadvantaged pupils made was similar to other pupils nationally. In English, pupils' attainment remained significantly above the national average. You know where further improvement is needed, notably in humanities, and that persistent absence needs to be reduced.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Systems for signing in visitors to the school are robust. The single central record is kept up to date and all necessary checks are made when appointing new staff. All staff and governors have been trained well on how to keep children safe from abuse, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism.

Staff make appropriate referrals to the designated safeguarding lead. You use these referrals to seek the right advice and/or support from relevant external agencies. Child protection records are stored securely, with details of actions and resolutions logged appropriately. Records demonstrate the appropriate and timely actions taken when a child is at risk and in need of support.

Pupils reported that they feel safe in school and are happy. They told me that staff are very approachable and said that they know who they can turn to if they have concerns. They talked to me about how their assemblies and the curriculum help them to understand and manage risks, such as those involving the use of social networking sites. Those pupils who are the most vulnerable are supported well by members of the pastoral team, who know them extremely well as individuals.

Breaktimes are orderly and pleasant social occasions when many pupils chat and enjoy one another's company. To ensure pupils' safety, staff supervise open areas and the entrances to the school at the start and end of the school day.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry, in order to ascertain that the school remains good, focused on the extent to which standards in humanities, modern foreign

languages and double-award science are improving. I also looked at what leaders are doing to improve outcomes in mathematics so that they are the same standard as in English.

- The leadership team is beginning to take effective action to improve the progress of pupils in humanities. For example, the acting head of faculty is working on improving the consistency of practice. One pupil told me, 'History is fantastic. I have learned loads.'
- In science, you have correctly identified stretching the most able of those who study the double award as an area that needs further work. In lessons, inspectors saw pupils making the most of their learning time, and responding quickly and appropriately to instructions given by members of staff. In modern foreign languages, weaknesses were caused by frequent changes of staffing. The department is now fully staffed.
- In mathematics, well focused staff training has noticeably improved the overall quality of teaching, especially for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, who are doing better. However, you rightly acknowledge that the rapid increase in the proportions of pupils meeting and exceeding expectations in English is not yet matched in mathematics.
- My second line of enquiry concentrated on the impact of leadership on improving pupils' attendance and reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions. Evidence gathered on inspection demonstrated that this has been a key focus for development. You have raised the fundamental importance of attending school regularly through frequent updates to parents in newsletters and through the introduction of pupil reward systems. Attendance is monitored closely, especially for those pupils who are disadvantaged. This means that any concerns about pupils' attendance are dealt with promptly and the appropriate external agencies are involved. Leaders have introduced a number of strategies to improve attendance, including giving pupils their own personal attendance data. This is valued by pupils, who now understand the importance of good attendance. Due to leaders' persistent focus, overall attendance is now broadly in line with the national average. However, you recognise that further work is needed to engage with the families of those pupils who are persistently absent. You are exploring further strategies to improve the situation.
- From a position of fixed-term exclusions of pupils being above the national average, the number in the current year has steadily reduced. This has come about as a result of leaders' heightened expectations and the use of an increasingly effective behaviour policy and rewards system. The very large majority of parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire agreed that pupils are well behaved.
- My third line of enquiry focused on the school's use of pupil premium funding to diminish the differences between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally. Leaders have identified clearly the barriers that disadvantaged pupils face and have pinpointed strategies that help them to overcome obstacles to their learning. From their low starting points, most pupils make good progress in a wide range of subjects.

- Progress in English is particularly strong. Pupils benefit from consistently good teaching, additional support tailored to their individual needs, and access to a range of other support. Leaders rigorously track the progress that individual pupils make and ensure that there is a swift response to any identified issues. Leaders and governors evaluate the impact of the use of pupil premium funding thoroughly. Gaps in progress between the disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally have narrowed significantly as a result

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching in humanities continues to improve, so that the progress pupils make is at least in line with the national average
- recent improvements in the quality of mathematics teaching are maintained and built on, so that outcomes match those achieved in English
- the number of pupils who are persistently absent from school is reduced, so that it is at least in line with the national average for all pupils.

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

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher to discuss the key lines of enquiry. I held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority and with a governor. I scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, school improvement plan, the school website, the school effectiveness adviser's report, the progress check report, and the safeguarding audit. Together with my colleague, we scrutinised the child protection procedures and the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, and information relating to attendance. I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms, met more formally with a group of pupils selected by you from all year groups and observed pupils at breaktime. We both undertook observations of pupils' learning in a series of short visits to a number of lessons, particularly English, mathematics, science and humanities. All of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team. I read through the comments placed by parents on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I considered the school's own surveys of pupils and staff, and spoke to staff informally.