

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Ben Baxter
Executive headteacher
The Cooper School
Churchill Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire
OX26 4RS

Dear Mr Baxter

Short inspection of The Cooper School

Following my visit to the school on 6 June 2017 with James Rouse, 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 your school was judged to be good in May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You are driven by a desire to raise the aspirations of all pupils and have maintained and developed the culture of school improvement. You are ably supported by strong and knowledgeable senior and middle leaders who share your ambitions for the school. With the support of your dedicated board of directors, you have developed a school that knows itself well and have correctly identified where improvements should be made.

There is a caring, nurturing and inclusive ethos that permeates the school. Inspectors were impressed by the calm and purposeful atmosphere and the strong relationships between staff and pupils and among pupils themselves. As one member of staff said: 'This is a great place to work, with a staff body who genuinely cares about the pupils and wants the best for them.' As a result, pupils are keen to learn and make good progress from their starting points. Pupils have great confidence in their teachers and very much value what staff do for them. Therefore, they behave very well, both in lessons and around the school.

The partnership with Glory Farm Primary School, as part of the Bicester Learning Academy, is having a positive impact on pupils' progress overall. Staff across the two schools often share their expertise and a member of The Cooper School regularly provides reading support to pupils at Glory Farm. These strategies are

ensuring that pupils make the transfer from school to school with much greater confidence. In addition, teachers at The Cooper School are more aware of what pupils already know and can do when they arrive in Year 7. As a result, work is not repeated unnecessarily and pupils are making better progress over time.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors identified that pupils would make more rapid progress if the quality of teaching were improved still further, especially the quality of advice and guidance given to pupils to improve their work. Inspectors also identified that key groups, such as disadvantaged pupils and the most able in English and mathematics, needed to make better progress.

Leaders and directors have tackled these issues effectively. You have placed high importance on the development of staff and there is a rich and varied programme of professional training, which is helping teachers to improve their practice. In addition, you have a clear strategy to support and develop your middle leaders. They particularly value the career opportunities they are given and the trust you place in them to lead their teams effectively. Although there has been some recent staff turbulence within the mathematics department, this is now stabilising and consequently pupils are making better progress overall. Actions to improve the progress of all groups of pupils in English are also proving effective.

You have implemented your school-wide 'STAR' strategy ('strengths, target, action, response') to enable teachers to identify how pupils can improve their work and for pupils to respond to advice. During the inspection, we saw many examples of this strategy being very well used and having a positive effect on accelerating the rates of progress for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able. However, you recognise that not all teachers are using the school's strategy either consistently or to develop pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding sufficiently. Consequently, some pupils' progress is sometimes more limited.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding and the welfare of pupils are a strength of the school. Leaders are passionately committed to this area of the school's work. All statutory safeguarding arrangements are in place and monitored rigorously. Record-keeping is extremely thorough and methodical. Training for staff and directors is robust and there are regular updates. The director who monitors safeguarding arrangements makes frequent visits to the school to ensure that processes and procedures are properly implemented.

Pupils are taught how to stay safe through assemblies and in their personal, social health and economic (PSHE) education lessons, which are now taught by specialist staff. Pupils told inspectors that they know whom to go to if they have a problem and they particularly value the tutoring system, which enables them to make strong relationships with pupils in other year groups. They say that bullying is infrequent but they have confidence in school staff to deal with it if it occurs. Pastoral support is a high priority within the school and pupils speak very positively about the effectiveness of pupil support services. Parents agree; as one said: 'Student support

is a fantastic team... an asset to the school and a safe place that children know they can go to if they have any issues, big or small.'

Better systems are now in place to track pupils' attendance and to provide support for those who find it difficult to come to school. As a result, attendance is improving overall, particularly for groups whose attendance was weak in the past, such as disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, we agreed to look at the progress of disadvantaged pupils across subjects because this group has performed less well than others over time.
- All staff understand the need to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and give their needs high priority within the school. Leaders and teachers track and monitor pupils' progress regularly and provide extra help quickly if pupils are falling behind. Leaders spend pupil premium funding wisely on strategies that have demonstrable impact on improving pupils' outcomes. For example, a team of higher-level teaching assistants supports disadvantaged pupils in key subject areas where they need extra help.
- The school's focus on literacy is helping to improve rates of progress for disadvantaged pupils, especially boys, whose progress rates have been slower in the past. Leaders also work effectively with vulnerable families. This is helping to raise disadvantaged pupils' aspirations of what they can do and achieve. As a result, disadvantaged pupils currently in the school are now making faster progress, especially in key stage 3, and they are catching up with other pupils nationally.
- Another aspect of the school's work that we agreed to look at was the quality of teaching and how this is affecting the progress that the most able pupils make.
- The development of teaching is a key focus in the school. During our visits to lessons, we saw a wide variety of learning activities which were well planned by staff using their excellent subject knowledge. The climate for learning is very positive and the level of pupil engagement is high. Pupils are confident, articulate and collaborate well with their peers. They feel safe to ask and answer questions in class and to present their ideas. Their assessment books are effective in helping pupils to keep track of their progress in each subject over time. Pupils are proud of these books and told inspectors that they find them useful for revision.
- A number of strategies have been put in place specifically targeted at the most able pupils. For example, you have appointed a 'more-able coordinator' to keep a particular eye on the progress of this group of pupils. Leaders have also introduced the 'scholars' groups in Years 7 to 11 and the 'aspirers' group for the most able sixth-form students. These strategies are proving effective in raising the aspirations of these targeted pupils and encouraging them to make faster progress.
- The most able pupils are making good progress overall. However, some of them

are not making maximum progress because they are not routinely expected to tackle the hardest work set for them. They spend too long on easier tasks that fail to challenge them. Some pupils confirmed this to inspectors, and some parents also shared this view.

- We also agreed to look at how successful the school has been in maximising achievement in the sixth form.
- Leaders are aware of the weaker outcomes for sixth-form students in 2016 and the reasons for this. As a result, you have acted swiftly to improve the reliability of the grades that teachers predict for students. Leadership of the sixth form is strong and there are now higher expectations of what students can achieve due to more ambitious target-setting. There is a greater focus on the quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form, and the senior leadership team has played an instrumental role in this process. You have strengthened your systems for identifying when students are falling behind and you have implemented interventions in a more timely manner. As a result of these measures, the progress of current students is stronger.
- To sustain improvement, leaders have changed the interview and induction processes for entry to the sixth form, resulting in better guidance for pupils as to the most appropriate courses for them. In addition, Year 11 pupils are now benefiting from bespoke careers advice, which is helping them to make informed decisions about their post-16 destinations.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- there is a greater focus on ensuring that the most able pupils routinely tackle more challenging work so that they make faster progress
- staff use the school's strategy for helping pupils to improve their work and deepen their knowledge, skills and understanding more consistently.

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

Yours sincerely

Paula Sargent
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, your leadership team, middle leaders, and staff responsible for attendance and safeguarding. I met three members of the board of directors, including the chair, and had a telephone conversation with an educational consultant who supports the school. We met pupils in all year groups, some informally in lessons, and interviewed a range of pupils in a formal meeting in which we discussed their learning and views on school life. We visited lessons across a range of subjects and year groups, together with members of the leadership team, to observe pupils' learning.

Inspectors carried out a scrutiny of the work in pupils' books. We looked at a range of school documentation, including current assessment information, the school's improvement plan, leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness, attendance information for current pupils, and minutes of governing body meetings. Inspectors considered the 245 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire, 75 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire, 112 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and the 111 written comments by parents.