

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



8 November 2017

Mr Tom Jackson-Owens
Acting Principal
Columbus School and College
Oliver Way
Chelmsford
Essex
CM1 4ZB

Dear Mr Jackson-Owens

Short inspection of Columbus School and College

Following my visit to the school on 19 September 2017 with Sharon Wilson, 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 outstanding in July 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your deep commitment to the school is reflected in the exceptional support you provide for the pupils and their families throughout their time with you. Your strong track record of success means that you are held in high esteem by other schools and by the local authority.

Your self-evaluation is accurate and clearly identifies the school's many strengths. You and your staff are always looking to improve the school further and have very clear plans for the future. Your philosophy of 'show respect, take responsibility, consider others, believe in yourself' permeates throughout the school. Staff work tirelessly to ensure an outstanding provision for pupils.

Pupils are at the heart of what staff do each day and are always put first. Teachers expertly plan learning sessions so that pupils of all abilities make outstanding progress over time. Staff go to great lengths to ensure that pupils can access all learning activities. Pupils told us that they love coming to school, are happy and very well cared for. Their behaviour around the school and in lessons continues to be exemplary. Pupils are kind and respectful towards each other and their teachers.

Parents say how delighted they are that their children attend this school, and the vast majority would recommend the school to other parents. One parent expressed the views of many, commenting that, 'Columbus remains an exceptional school, with many incredible members of staff, who do over and above what is expected of

them.' Another said, 'A wonderful, fantastic, supportive school. I feel confident that you will struggle to find errors in such an amazing school. They deserve merits all round!'

Previously, inspectors asked you to ensure that staff have opportunities to spend time at both the school and the college campus in order to learn about the differing needs of all pupils. This was to enable staff to support pupils' individual needs more effectively. This has now been fully addressed. Since the last inspection, a staff consultation committee has been set up to share ideas about good practice. The senior leadership team has worked hard to ensure consistently outstanding teaching and support for pupils on both sites. However, you rightly acknowledge that the school needs to identify future leaders and provide them with further professional development opportunities.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The single central record is kept up to date and all necessary checks are made when appointing new staff. Child protection records are exceptionally well maintained. All staff receive regular training and are aware of how to make referrals using the school's system. Partnerships with local agencies are very well established. Risk assessments are extremely thorough. Staff are meticulous in how they maintain records and administer medications for pupils.

Staff know their pupils exceptionally well. Any concerns about pupils' welfare are swiftly addressed. Staff ensure that pupils, including those who have communication barriers, have every possibility to express any worries and concerns. Pupils say that they feel safe and are kept safe by staff.

In discussions with senior leaders, convincing evidence was provided about pupils' attendance. It is clear that staff do all they can to make sure that pupils attend regularly. However, for some pupils, due to medical reasons, attendance is sometimes sporadic.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, inspectors focused on the key lines of enquiry: how effectively the school keeps in touch with parents and placing authorities; how successfully leaders are tackling the area for improvement from the previous inspection; how well pupils' communication skills develop at a suitable rate; to what extent the curriculum meets the needs of the pupils; and how leaders and staff ensure that pupils are safe.
- Daily communication between home and school, using a home–school book, helps parents to support what pupils have been learning in school. The sharing of information through 'parent mail', the school website, parents' evenings and regular contact with parents ensures that they contribute to their children's excellent progress. The family support advocate and well-being advocate provide strong guidance and reassurance to parents about their child's needs. One parent

said: 'Staff are good at involving parents and taking their views on board. If I had a concern I know that it would be responded to quickly'.

- You also have clear lines of communication with local authorities in order to provide the best possible education. Your local authority regards yours as an innovative and developmental school, with a sustained capacity to move forward.
- During the inspection, we also considered whether the curriculum was sufficiently enriched by appropriate learning opportunities. You give a great deal of consideration to the design of your curriculum. You ensure that it is adapted to make learning fun and accessible for all pupils, regardless of how complex their needs are. While recognising the necessity of providing access to all the subjects, you acknowledge the need to combine this with the development of wider skills. Subject-specific learning experiences are expertly intertwined with skills such as those of communication, problem solving, social and motor development, and independence.
- Pupils at this school enjoy an enormous range of activities in all subjects. Lessons are presented in such a way that fascinates them. Learning is carefully planned to capture pupils' imagination. There is a continued focus on developing pupils' independence through an engaging and stimulating curriculum. Staff go to great lengths to ensure that pupils can access all activities, for example in the varied trips into the local community. Parents appreciate the way that their children are well cared for. One parent stated: 'Lessons are really well planned and are geared to preparing students for moving on to adult life.'
- Roles, including through membership of the school council, enable pupils to develop their self-confidence. A broad range of extra-curricular activities, including football, rugby, swimming and trampolining, helps to enrich pupils' lives.
- Pupil premium funding is used to support both individual pupils and wider school initiatives. Consequently, in common with other groups of pupils, disadvantaged pupils and the most able make exceptionally strong progress. This is because the tailored curriculum allows pupils to surmount any barriers they have in their learning. The staff are clear where each pupil is in their learning and carefully plan the next steps that need to be taken.
- The school excels in developing pupils' communication skills. It provides an effective programme of support. Children get off to a very strong start when they join the early years class. Well-embedded routines with visual reminders ensure that every opportunity is a learning experience. Speech and language therapists ensure that all staff across the key stages use the most effective form of communication with each individual. This has had a very positive impact on the development of pupils' confidence and self-esteem.
- Teachers use interactive technology effectively to help pupils understand their learning well. Signs, symbols, gestures, and the use of real objects and photographs, are a regular part of everyday lessons throughout the school. Inspectors saw pupils using different forms of communication when moving from one area of the school to another to help them prepare for their next activity. Every pupil has a means of asking questions and expressing choice due to the

excellent methods available to help pupils to communicate.

- Pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder and those who have complex learning needs are given clearly defined routines. Symbols representing the work to be done and communication cards showing rewards to be achieved give pupils a clear direction.
- Governance has continued to improve and strengthen, ensuring that the governing body maintains a wide range of skills. Your chair of governors shares your high aspirations, such as equality of opportunity for every pupil. Governors have an excellent understanding of the range of needs of their pupils. As a result, governors are able to challenge school leaders extremely well. Governors have confidence in the new principal who joins the school in January. They are pleased that you will be staying as vice-principal and feel that this very strong team will continue to take the school forward.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- build on the strong leadership expertise that already exists in the school and plan for leadership succession by identifying potential future leaders, and providing them with well-targeted professional development opportunities.

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

Yours sincerely

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors spoke with you and a range of other staff. The lead inspector met your chair of governors. She also spoke to a representative from the local authority. Inspectors scrutinised an array of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, and information related to safeguarding and pupils' progress.

Inspectors visited classrooms through observations and learning walks with senior leaders. Inspectors took account of the free-text responses on Ofsted's online questionnaire from parents, as well as staff responses. Inspectors considered the most recent school-based survey of parents' and staff views. They spoke to staff informally throughout the day. They also spoke to a number of parents both face to face and on the telephone. There were no responses from pupils to Ofsted's online survey, so inspectors spoke formally to a group of pupils as well as informally to

pupils during the school day. They also took into consideration the school's internal pupil survey questionnaire results.