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Mrs Amy Grashoff
Acting Headteacher
St James School
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Dear Mrs Grashoff

Short inspection of St James School

Following my visit to the school on 31 January 2018 with Mary Massey, 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in March 2015.

This school continues to be good.

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

There have been a number of changes in the school's leadership since the previous inspection. In May 2016, the school became an academy and joined the Ted Wragg Multi-Academy Trust. The headteacher at the time of the previous inspection is now the chief executive officer of this multi-academy trust. A new headteacher was appointed, although he was subsequently seconded to another school. Since January 2017, you have been the acting headteacher of this school. As a consequence of these adjustments, there have been several other changes to the membership of the school's leadership team. You have worked with the chief executive officer to ensure that new senior leaders quickly hone the appropriate skills.

Following the previous inspection, school leaders were advised to develop the school's work in all areas in order to match the strong progress being made in mathematics and English. You and your leadership team have successfully invested much effort into developing quality assurance systems. These are designed to cross-check the effectiveness of all aspects of the school's work. Emphasis has then been given to using evidence to make further improvements. The role of the governing body has been important in achieving this. Governors have a clear overview of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the school and have helped to ensure that leaders' work remains sharply focused.

It was clear to inspectors that members of staff are supportive of senior leaders and that there is a strong team ethos. Survey responses confirmed this view. Members of staff are committed to improving the effectiveness of the school's work and you provide strong motivation for improvement. You have ensured that there is a robust focus on improving classroom practice. Effective support is provided when needed so that the quality of teaching is rising across the school. High priority is given to helping pupils with poor literacy skills, and those who are disadvantaged.

In recent years, examination results in mathematics have shown that pupils have typically made more progress than other pupils nationally. GCSE results in English and mathematics have been maintained at above the national average; pupils make strong progress in these subjects. Examination results have been good overall, although there have been some fluctuations; for example, in 2016 results were stronger than in 2017. The curriculum is designed to encourage high achievement with a wide range of courses offered. The proportion of pupils who achieved the English Baccalaureate at high grades was well above the national average in 2017.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your leadership team have ensured that there is an effective culture of keeping pupils safe from harm. This is supported in the surveys of pupils, school employees and parents. You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. All members of staff are aware of their responsibilities and carry out their duties diligently. Thorough checks are made to ensure that all employees, volunteers and any other visitors to the school are suitable to work with children. Detailed records are kept and these meet all statutory requirements.

Staff and pupils know how to report any matters which concern them. The system used to gather information makes it possible to coordinate follow-up actions. You and other leaders work closely with other agencies to see through any matters which need further investigation or actions. Leaders' work with children who are looked after by the local authority is extremely thorough.

All members of staff receive appropriate and regular training on matters of safeguarding. Members of the governing body are equipped to carry out their duties effectively, for example with respect to staff recruitment. Pupils are well informed about the things that they can do to keep themselves safe, for example when using the internet.

Inspectors saw that conduct around the school is very good with pupils being respectful to each other and to adults. Pupils demonstrated tolerance towards others and they confirmed that they feel the school is a safe environment. Staff clearly endorsed this view in their responses to the survey. A small number of parents expressed some concerns about bullying. Pupils who met inspectors told us that if any incidents of bullying are reported the school deals quickly and effectively with them. The records of all bullying incidents show that there has been an improvement over time and incidents of intolerance are infrequent.

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed the inspection would focus on four key lines of enquiry: attendance, the curriculum, preparing pupils for life in modern Britain and how the school prepares pupils for the next stage of their education. These were based on information about the school's work since the previous inspection, alongside your own evaluation of the school's strengths and areas requiring improvement.
- I examined the school's attendance records because, although overall attendance is in line with the national average, absence rates have risen a little since the previous inspection. The school identifies particular pupils who have higher absence rates, and a number of actions are taken to support pupils to make improvements. In many cases, this has successfully increased attendance rates.
- The school works closely with the education welfare service to help some pupils and their families to try to resolve problems. In a small number of cases, complex issues have been tackled by working in liaison with other agencies, including medical services. Inspectors could see that appropriate actions are being taken, although some very complex situations are challenging to resolve.
- Inspectors visited a range of classes to assess the progress of pupils of all ages. Inspectors saw that the quality of teaching is good and pupils are making secure progress. Leaders have identified examples of strong practice and opportunities are taken to share these with other teachers. These activities are further strengthening standards across the school.
- Inspectors found evidence of strong improvements in several subject areas, including foreign languages, history and physical education. We saw examples of high-quality feedback to pupils who understood exactly what they need to do in order to make further progress. In many lessons, we saw that pupils were enthusiastic about their learning, and highly motivated to achieve well. Progress was strong in most subjects for all year groups.
- The school fulfils its duty to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain. Pupils have opportunities for learning in a variety of ways including tutor time, assemblies and special events. For example, in May 2017 pupils held a 'mock election' which shadowed the political process happening across the country. Pupils told inspectors that this was an effective way for them to learn about the systems of democracy and elections.
- Some aspects of personal, social and health education are not well developed. Pupils told inspectors that they do not feel secure about applying their learning, for example, with regard to personal relationships. Leaders are aware that pupils find some of their learning experiences to be disjointed because they are spread over tutor periods, assemblies and other events. They are looking to find ways of resolving this.
- In recent years, all pupils have moved on to education or employment with training at the end of Year 11. Pupils confirmed to inspectors that they are given a wide range of opportunities to learn about the pathways open to them after Year 11. Every pupil in Year 11 has at least one personal appointment with the school's transition mentor. The mentor's ongoing support is available for those

who require it for a considerable time after pupils leave this school.

- Published information shows that a number of these placements have not been sustained successfully because some former pupils changed their plans. Records show that often these young adults subsequently started an alternative course or training with success. Records also show that some former pupils have moved away from the city.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- there is improved provision for personal, social and health education so that pupils gain a better understanding and are able to apply this to their lives.

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

Yours sincerely

Ann Cox
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors spoke with you and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust. We had discussions with senior teachers and other members of staff. I had a conversation with the chair of governors. We visited lessons across all year groups to observe learning in a broad range of subjects. We took opportunities to look at the quality of work in samples of pupils' books, and talked with them about their progress. We talked informally with pupils around the school and also held a meeting with a small group of pupils from Year 9 and Year 11 to discuss their learning experiences. We considered documentary evidence relating to the impact of the school's work, including safeguarding and attendance. I scrutinised the school's evaluation documents and the improvement plans which are already in place. We looked at examples of the school's systems to monitor pupils' progress. We took into account 53 responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online survey. The views of 60 members of staff were gathered through the staff survey. Twenty-four pupils responded to the pupil survey.