

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Annie Thomson
Headteacher
The Marlborough Science Academy
Watling Street
St Albans
AL1 2QA

Dear Mrs Thomson

Short inspection of The Marlborough Science Academy

Following my visit to the school on 8 February 2018, together with Andrew Hemmings, HMI, and Vivien Corrie-Wing, 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 April 2014.

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 rightly proud that Marlborough Science Academy is a caring, welcoming school in which pupils are safe and learn in a calm environment. Relationships are exceptionally positive and characterised by mutual respect. This gives pupils the security to test and to share their ideas during classroom discussion, and to ask for help when they need it. Pupils enjoy coming to school because, as one put it, 'teachers always go the extra mile to help us, and there is so much to get involved in outside of our lessons.' A very high proportion of pupils involve themselves in one or more of the many sporting, musical and cultural opportunities offered by the school. You remove any barriers that might prevent disadvantaged pupils from engaging in all that the school has to offer. As a result, these pupils participate fully in the life of the school.

Staff successfully ensure that pupils behave very well, both inside and outside the classroom; they deal effectively with the very few incidents of unacceptable conduct that do occur. The almost unanimous view of parents and carers who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agree that the school ensures that pupils are well behaved; parents are also exceptionally positive about all other aspects of provision. Pupils who spoke with inspectors say that you have been successful in your determination to create a community in which 'there is always someone to help, to support and to inspire'. As a result, most pupils make good progress and achieve public examination results that are at least in line with pupils with the same

starting points nationally.

Together with other leaders and governors, you are rigorous in checking the quality of the school's provision, and relentless in pursuing improvement. You identified that, sometimes, Year 7 pupils completed work that was insufficiently challenging and subsequently made less progress than they might. In response, you have ensured that teachers plan activities that help Year 7 pupils to quickly build upon what they have learned at primary school. As a result, pupils typically make a strong start to their secondary learning. The most able pupils, within both key stages 3 and 4, who spoke with inspectors said that they usually find tasks interesting and 'hard enough to make you think, but not so hard that you give up'.

Since the previous inspection, you have made significant changes to staffing and to the curriculum. These have improved the support provided both to pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN) and to those pupils who join the school with low levels of literacy and numeracy. In the past, some of these pupils have not made enough progress. Most, though not yet all, of these pupils are now making good progress because of these changes.

Governors share your commitment to provide the very best education and care for pupils and provide you with strong support. Governors gather evidence from a variety of sources, including their own regular visits to the school and reports commissioned from external experts, to assure themselves of the quality of education the school provides. They use this information to provide timely and appropriate challenge to you and to other leaders, which helps to secure improvements.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Leaders, including governors, have helped to establish a culture in which pupils' safety is everybody's responsibility and a top priority. Staff, parents and pupils are rightly confident that pupils are well cared for at school.

Staff know pupils well and are alert to any changes in attendance, appearance or behaviour that might indicate a pupil may be vulnerable or at risk. Adults understand and make use of school processes for reporting any concerns they may have. Leaders deal with any concerns sensitively and appropriately; they are tenacious in their efforts to secure support from other agencies when that is needed.

Almost all pupils say they are safe and enjoy their learning. They told inspectors that bullying is uncommon, and that teachers deal with it effectively on the rare occasions when it does occur. The very large number of parents who responded to Parent View were almost unanimous in agreeing with this judgement, and the school's records confirm that repeat incidents of bullying are exceptionally rare.

Pupils appreciate the fact that, in the words of one, 'It doesn't matter if you are gay, or transgender, or just a bit different – everyone is accepted and we just get on well with each other.' Pupils also appreciate the steps the school takes to help those with mental health issues, such as providing access to counselling.

Governors take care to monitor the school's safeguarding processes and practices. They ensure that leaders carry out the relevant checks on adults working at the school and that the record of these checks is accurately maintained. Governors have also ensured that pupils, and students in the sixth form, are taught about different risks in an age-appropriate manner and how they can best minimise these.

Inspection findings

- The inspection team's first line of enquiry involved establishing the extent to which staff respond to unacceptable behaviour consistently. This was an area for improvement identified within the previous inspection report. Leaders' records indicate that on a typical day, there are only a handful of incidents of repeated disruption to learning. No poor behaviour was seen during the inspection. Parents, pupils and staff who responded to Ofsted's surveys typically indicated that such behaviour is very rare, as are incidences of internal or external exclusion. Pupils say that teachers apply sanctions consistently and fairly.
- We also agreed to establish how far leaders have reduced pupil absence. The previous inspection report indicated that sixth-form attendance was too low. Leaders were concerned about disadvantaged pupils' attendance. Effective work with pupils and parents has helped to remove the barriers that prevent individuals from attending regularly. Attendance is now above the national average, and disadvantaged pupils' attendance is close to that of other pupils. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent has fallen considerably and is now below the national average for this group of pupils. Attendance among sixth-form students is high, particularly in Year 12, because you are embedding a culture of good attendance and of high aspiration.
- We agreed that the next line of enquiry would be to explore the progress being made by current pupils, particularly SEN pupils and those who are disadvantaged. In 2017, too many of these pupils had made insufficient progress in one or more of English, mathematics, science or languages by the end of Year 11.
- You have increased the number of specialist staff who provide effective extra, small-group 'rapid progress' tuition in English and in mathematics for SEN pupils with low literacy and numeracy levels. However, these pupils are making less progress in science, where such support is less extensive. Although leaders have provided staff with precise information about the individual needs of SEN pupils and the best ways to meet them, some teachers do not always use it effectively. This limits the progress of a small number of pupils.
- Leaders are identifying barriers to learning that prevent some disadvantaged pupils from doing as well as they should. They are using this information to provide individuals with additional help, such as a quiet, supervised place to complete homework, access to a computer or revision textbooks to take home. This, together with additional support within school, such as one-to-one tuition,

means that most who fall behind catch up quickly. In most subjects and year groups, disadvantaged pupils are making good progress.

- Overall, increasingly effective teaching is enabling Year 11 pupils to make stronger progress than was the case for last year's cohort. Although too many pupils' attainment in modern foreign languages was low in 2017, inspection evidence indicates that, over time, teaching is effective in promoting current pupils' progress. Additional tuition is helping individuals who have fallen behind to catch up. A recently appointed subject leader is helping a number of newly appointed teachers to drive forward improvements within science. As a result, most groups of pupils are now making more rapid progress, but the small number of less able pupils are doing less well in science than in English and mathematics.
- In 2017, overall, sixth-form students made less progress and achieved less well in their academic qualifications than they should have done. The final line of enquiry sought to establish whether current students are making good progress. In the past, some students underperformed because they were allowed to study courses that were inappropriate for them, given their ability and prior attainment at GCSE. In addition, expectations around students' attendance and completion of work during time set aside for independent study were not high enough. Teaching was not effective enough in ensuring that students understood how to gain the highest grades.
- Leaders acted robustly and, for the most part, effectively to address these issues. The sixth-form curriculum has been broadened so that students can, and typically do, choose courses that are a good match for their abilities and interests. Expectations around attendance are high, and students are required to complete supervised independent study when they are in school and not in taught lessons. As a result, they attend regularly and use their time productively.
- Comprehensive improvement plans for each subject have been put in place and followed through effectively. Sixth-form students speak very positively about the support that they are given, explaining that their work is interesting and challenging. They say that they are keen to reach their target grades, and know how to do so. This was evident during inspectors' observations of their learning. Students appreciate the guidance about applying to university, entering the workplace or securing high-level apprenticeships; they say it is useful and motivates them.
- Your monitoring indicates that most students in the sixth form are making good progress as a result of these changes. However, a small number of students are making less progress than they might because they have been admitted to one or more courses that are too challenging for them, or that are otherwise unsuitable.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- continue to improve the support that teachers provide for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, so that they are able to make good progress from their individual starting points
- continue to improve the effectiveness of teaching within science, so that pupils make more rapid progress, particularly the less able
- ensure that all pupils who join the sixth form make good progress as a result of studying courses that are a good fit, given their individual abilities and interests.

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

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- Inspectors held discussions with you about the key lines of enquiry for this inspection, leaders' evaluation of the quality of education, plans for future improvement and information about current pupils' and students' learning.
- Inspectors met with other leaders, teachers, members of the support staff, the school's local authority improvement partner and the chair of governors, together with four other governors.
- Documents were examined, including: the school's improvement plan; leaders' monitoring and analysis of the progress pupils and students make; records of their attendance and behaviour; pupil premium reports; and the school's safeguarding arrangements, records and files.
- Inspectors observed pupils' and students' learning and looked at examples of their work in a wide variety of subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with several groups of pupils, with students in the sixth form and with others informally during lessons regarding their learning. In addition, inspectors considered the views of 435 pupils who responded to Ofsted's online survey.
- The views of 305 parents who responded on Parent View, and those of the 63 staff who completed Ofsted's staff questionnaire, were also taken in to account.