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27 March 2018

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Dear Mrs Exley

Short inspection of The Gilberd School

Following my visit to the school on 13 March 2018, with Ofsted Inspectors Donna Young and John Wilson, 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 November 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in certain areas. This may indicate that the school is improving towards being outstanding. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

Since the previous inspection, the school has improved year on year. For example, in 2016, pupils' progress from key stage 2 to the end of key stage 4 was in the top 20% in the country and significantly above average scores nationally. In 2017, pupils' progress was again significantly above the national average. Disadvantaged pupils make overall progress that is at least in line with that of other pupils nationally.

Pupils enter the school in Year 7 with attainment that is broadly average. They leave the school at the end of Year 11 attaining results in their best eight subjects, which are on average almost half a grade higher than those of their peers nationally. This was achieved through the development of highly effective teaching.

You and your senior leaders have maintained a strong focus on continuous, sustainable improvement. Areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been constant themes for the school's professional development programme. This has brought clear rewards, evidenced through strengths seen in the quality of

teaching. You know the school very well and are rigorous in checking the quality of the school's provision and relentless in pursuing ambitious outcomes for pupils. You are very clear that 'quick fixes' are not in the long-term interests of the pupils. As one parent stated, 'The school seems to be constantly evolving to find even better ways of doing things.'

Although rightly proud of the school's academic achievements, leaders are equally passionate about providing the pupils in your care with skills and attributes that will support them throughout their adult life. An example is the current drive to provide opportunities for pupils to develop oracy skills. You recognise that these additional skills will further enhance the life chances of pupils.

The 'Gilberd Way Awards' are designed to guide pupils 'on a leadership career in readiness for the competitive world that awaits them in the future'. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about the variety of opportunities to gain the coveted bronze, silver and gold awards across all aspects of school life. The school monitors pupils' involvement in the wider life of the school to ensure that all groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, participate fully.

Your pupils benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities that include music, the arts and sports. Sports trophies are prominently displayed to celebrate success. Pupils in the boys' choir, who performed to a large assembly during the inspection, stated that, 'singing in front of lots of people helps to build their confidence'.

Your governors are committed to the 'guiding principles' of 'The Gilberd Way', which reflect British values. They also aspire to your vision of excellence in all aspects of school life. Governors understand the school well and are dedicated to supporting you and your leaders to provide the very best education and care for pupils. They offer leaders challenge by gaining information about the school in a variety of ways. This includes visits to the school and reports from both leaders and external experts. Governors bring a breadth of knowledge and expertise to the ways in which they challenge and support the school.

The behaviour of pupils around the school is impeccable. Low-level disruption in lessons is extremely rare. Pupils are polite and courteous to adults and each other. They wear their uniforms smartly and treat the inviting school environment with respect. In lessons, the atmosphere is positive and industrious. Pupils show their appreciation for the education they receive at school through their very high levels of regular attendance. Pupils acknowledge the excellent levels of support they receive both academically and pastorally. They are clear that, 'this is a school where it is ok to be different'.

Your staff say that they are well supported and value professional development opportunities highly. They reported that, 'everyone is held accountable to the same high standards and their work is valued'. A member of staff commented, 'I am proud to work here. I love it when people ask me where I work.'

Safeguarding is effective.

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

The single central record meets statutory requirements.

Leaders and governors have constructed a culture of safeguarding in the school. Staff know pupils well and are alert to any changes in attendance or behaviour that suggest that a pupil is at risk. Adults in the school use the school processes for reporting any concerns in a timely manner. Safeguarding leaders effectively manage concerns about pupils' well-being and safety. They act promptly when serious concerns are raised and have strong links with outside agencies to provide additional support for pupils. Training for staff is up to date, including in the 'Prevent' duty.

Pupils say that they feel safe at school and that the school works hard to inform them how to keep safe and healthy in the wider world. Parents overwhelmingly agree with this view.

Inspection findings

- To determine whether the school remained good, my first focus was the actions you have taken to secure the strong improvements in a wide range of subject areas in the last two years and the more recent improvements in science. You are clear that this success has not come easily and is due to a programme of constant improvement in teaching and learning that the school has developed. It quickly became evident that leaders know each teacher's strengths and areas for development very well. You were able to explain a range of strategies used to target aspects of teaching that monitoring has identified as less strong. All teachers have individual targets for development and get support through a finely tuned range of professional development, which closely matches these targets. Using this strategy, you have addressed historical underperformance in science and outcomes improved strongly last year. However, you are not complacent and are clear where improvements in the quality of teaching still need to be secured.
- Observations of teaching across both key stages in English, mathematics and humanities found that its impact on learning was highly effective. Staff have put into practice the advice they receive and the pupils make strong progress. Questioning is skilful and ensures that almost all misconceptions are resolved and concepts thoroughly explored. Pupils have the opportunity to attempt tasks that are sufficiently challenging to allow the most able to thrive, but carefully planned so that they are also accessible to lower ability pupils. This ensures that they all can make rapid progress and be equally proud of their achievements. Leaders systematically monitor the progress that pupils make against aspirational targets. The school's own performance information indicates that outcomes are set to rise still further this year.

- Leaders focus on the quality of teaching that pupils experience at all key stages on a daily basis, rather than just intensive interventions in Year 11. Consequently, the expectation is that teaching at key stage 3 embeds the skills needed for future success. This was seen consistently throughout the day of the inspection. For example, in key stage 3 science, exciting and engaging teaching meant that the difficult concept of balancing chemical formulas was embraced confidently by pupils and with great success.
- My next line of enquiry was around why pupils had made less progress in modern foreign languages in the last two years and what actions you have taken to address this. You have made a number of new appointments to the department since the last inspection and have ensured that the department receives regular support and monitoring through weekly meetings with one of your senior leaders. You have provided bespoke support to teachers in the department and this is now showing in improvements in the quality of teaching at both key stages 3 and 4. In particular, your leadership team identified that results last year were let down by pupils' poor speaking skills at the end of key stage 4. Inspectors observed a number of lessons in modern foreign languages and the impact of your work showed clear emerging strengths in the quality of pupils' oral responses. They were confident in their spoken use of the language and, in many cases, were enthusiastic learners. Moderation support from other local schools has resolved issues with the accuracy of assessments and has made sure that this is no longer a barrier to progress.
- More pupils now have confidence that they can achieve well in this subject and have demonstrated this by the increase in those who have chosen a languages course as a GCSE option. However, you are clear that provision in this area is not yet providing sufficiently strong outcomes, and leaders will continue to support teachers to sharpen their practice still further.
- The next line of enquiry focused on the element of the curriculum that offers a range of option choices to pupils outside the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects. The overall progress in this element was below the national averages for disadvantaged pupils, pupils who entered the school with lower prior attainment, and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Pupils underperformed in a small number of these subjects last year. Leaders identified this issue and swiftly provided support. Teaching seen by inspectors in these subjects was strong and engaging, securing gains in pupils' knowledge and understanding.
- You also explained that, after careful guidance, many of these pupils follow a curriculum that involves fewer than eight GCSE or equivalent courses. This leads to gaps in their progress profile and hence lower progress scores. You are committed to ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs of every pupil and have created two alternative pathways. These provide different experiences more suited to the needs of a small number of individuals. The first is the 'Steps' pathway where, alongside English, mathematics, science and two option subjects, pupils take other nationally recognised qualifications that deliver skills for life. Inspectors observed teaching in this course and were impressed by the enthusiastic approach pupils took to solve their challenging task. Work in folders also evidenced the high-quality writing skills pupils are developing over time. A

few pupils also follow a bespoke curriculum that involves some off-site alternative provision where they can learn a variety of work-based skills. Your leaders monitor the attendance, safety and progress of these pupils with care.

- The final line of enquiry was to find out whether the curriculum offer, and the careers information, advice and guidance offered to pupils, provided sufficient opportunities for pupils to excel. The number of pupils taking and achieving the EBacc is very much lower than national averages. I wanted to establish how this might affect progression opportunities when pupils leave the school. You acknowledge that this has been an area of concern historically, but that now, with a stronger modern foreign languages department, entries next year for the EBacc are set to improve dramatically.
- Published destination data for all pupils at the end of 2015 is at least in line with national figures. It shows that pupils leave your school and go on to appropriate destinations at local sixth forms and colleges, with some going into employment or apprenticeships. School information shows that this was also the case last year, with almost two thirds of pupils progressing to A-level courses. Disadvantaged pupils also achieved a good range of progression destinations last year in line with their peers.
- Leaders told inspectors about the wide range of support given to pupils to help them make successful transitions on leaving the school. You organise your own careers fair, and representatives from local school sixth forms, colleges, employers, apprenticeship providers and universities attend. Past pupils who have made successful and aspirational transitions attend assemblies to encourage pupils to 'aim high'. Pupils were very appreciative of this programme of support. However, a small number of pupils were less happy with the online advice they were able to access, which did not support them to make aspirational career choices. Others said that they would also find it helpful to have more information about the 'bigger picture' of progression, for example, the subject choices needed at A level to help secure future courses at university and college.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they continue to:

- improve progress in languages, so that pupils achieve the same high standards as in other subjects
- refine the extensive careers information and guidance available to pupils, so they can make very well-informed choices about their next steps.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of governors, the regional schools

commissioner and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kay Leach
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, members of the governing body, a representative from the local authority and groups of pupils. We made short visits to observe lessons and books across a wide range of subjects and year groups. All of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team.

We reviewed documents about school improvement, and self-evaluation, pupils' achievement and attendance, pupils' destinations, and safeguarding, including the single central record and child protection files.

Additionally, we considered 211 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, together with 82 responses returned by pupils and 86 returned by school staff. A parental view received directly by Ofsted was also considered.