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8 June 2019

Suzanne Ijewsky
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ijewsky

Short inspection of Friars Academy

Following my visit to the school on 22 May 2019 with Claire Buffham, 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 June 2015.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You prepare pupils extremely well for life beyond school by encouraging them to think for themselves and take responsibility for their work and behaviour. The staff involve pupils in setting targets, reviewing progress and managing their behaviour. This helps them to become confident and reflective learners.

Leaders and governors are committed to continuously improving the school. They critically evaluate the impact of actions taken so that lessons can be learned. Governors are well informed and know the school's strengths. This is because leaders provide them with regular verbal and written reports about the school's performance. Governors have the skills and experience to use this information to hold leaders to account. You provide appropriate training for school leaders so they can share responsibilities. This strengthens your capacity to contribute to leading a local teaching school alliance and plan for the opening of a new free school that will soon become part of the academy trust.

Pupils behave impeccably in lessons and around the school. Clear and well-organised routines, such as breakfast clubs, assemblies, playtimes, and clubs at both lunchtime and after school, all help to create a purposeful learning environment where pupils can develop their social skills. Therefore, pupils are respectful and caring towards their peers and polite to staff. Pupils say that they enjoy attending school. A typical comment from pupils was, 'The school is good because it helps every individual.'

Staff take great care to plan effective arrangements for pupils starting at the school. Many pupils experience anxiety, so individual packages are planned for everyone to reduce concerns. Tours and visits are gradually stepped up over the summer term and a summer school is offered to pupils starting in Year 7. Current pupils act as mentors to new starters at the summer school. This valuable work helps pupils to make a very positive start at the school.

At the time of the last inspection, senior leaders and governors were asked to ensure that learning activities in science met the needs of the less able pupils. All pupils are taught the same topics in science lessons, but they are broken down into smaller learning steps for the less able pupils, to enable them to make effective progress. Also, the science resources used are appropriate for pupils with severe learning disabilities. Since the time of the last inspection, a new head of science has been appointed. She has worked with other teachers to improve their knowledge and skills in teaching science. Inspectors observed high-quality questioning of pupils in lessons. Staff know the less able pupils extremely well and use this knowledge skilfully to engage them in learning by being aware of their interests and family backgrounds.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders, staff and governors take safeguarding extremely seriously. They understand the vulnerabilities of each pupil. Therefore, there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school and procedures for keeping pupils safe are robust, consistently applied and fit for purpose.

The school's single central record meets all statutory requirements. There is evidence that the headteacher, who is the designated safeguarding lead, has challenged any weaknesses in the single central record and made sure that they have been corrected. The child protection policy is clear and comprehensive.

All staff receive regular safeguarding training and they are required to answer questionnaires to show that they understand the information they have received. Any concerns are recorded on the school's electronic system and acted on appropriately by members of the designated safeguarding team.

Pupils talk positively about the range of outdoor spaces around the school they can use safely, such as a new outdoor classroom, a trim trail and running track on the field.

The school liaises effectively with external agencies, such as social care to support pupils who have child protection plans. Leaders also have strong relationships with the multi-agency, safeguarding hub team, to identify and provide very effective support for pupils and their families who may need early help.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, inspectors particularly focused on how effectively the school supports the well-being of pupils, the extent to which leaders ensure that

the curriculum meets the needs of all the pupils and how well the school engages with parents and carers.

- Leaders actively promote all aspects of pupils' welfare. The school's curriculum focuses on developing life skills and the ways in which pupils can keep themselves safe. Pupils told inspectors how they have learned about consensual relationships and sex education in personal, social and health education lessons. Pupils in Year 10 and 11 have worked with 'virtual' babies to develop parenting skills. During the inspection, the theme for pupils was, 'It's all about you', with a focus on keeping free from harm. They learned how to act safely when using hazardous materials and equipment. Some pupils discussed issues such as knife crime, and how people with religious beliefs sometimes experience prejudice. Pupils voiced their opinions in a considered way, showing respect for the points of view of others.
- Pupils say that they feel very safe in school and know who to go to if they have any concerns. They can also approach pupils who are prefects about minor issues, or a staff member for more serious concerns. Leaders are proactive in supporting pupils who experience anxiety. While pupils are taught by different teachers for each subject, teaching assistants move around the school with the same pupils, to provide continuity and support. Teaching assistants know the pupils they work with extremely well and question them effectively to extend their learning.
- There is very little bullying in the school. However, staff are aware of the potential threat of cyber bullying, so pupils are not permitted to use their phones in school and are required to hand them to staff at the start of the day. Incidents of poor behaviour are dealt with very successfully by bringing together those involved to repair relationships. Using a restorative approach is part of the school's behaviour policy and reflects the belief that pupils should be responsible for their behaviour. Some pupils need support to understand empathy, due to their needs and, therefore, staff use visual supports to assist them. However, poor behaviour is unusual, and staff are rarely required to physically restrain pupils. Rewards are given for excellent work or behaviour. Blue cards are awarded to pupils, who can then choose activities, such as going to the cinema or having a coffee with a friend. The school also has a Good Citizen's Award, which is chosen by the pupils.
- The curriculum is personalised and varied so it meets the needs of every pupil. As well as teaching the national curriculum subjects, teachers consider carefully how pupils' interests can be addressed. For instance, some pupils learn how to create podcasts. Others benefit from the provision of resources which support learning, such as individual workstations or visual supports. Many pupils who experience anxiety also benefit from the therapeutic effects of horse riding or the use of the school's sensory room. Themed weeks such as the expressive arts and life skills, provide a valuable additional focus to pupils' learning.
- Pupils make outstanding progress because lessons are very well planned and mostly pitched at exactly the right level. Inspectors observed skilful use of questioning by teachers, allowing pupils enough time to consider their answers. Teaching assistants also have a positive impact by quietly asking other questions

of individual pupils to further extend learning. Work in pupils' books is more evidence of the strong progress pupils make. One book showed a pupil's writing improving from being able to write a few words to completing complex sentences, over the course of one term. Pupils are included in setting their own targets and track their progress in 'progress tracker' folders. Typically, pupils who spoke with one of the inspectors told of their pride in their progress on the tracker.

- All subjects and courses taught can lead to pupils achieving qualifications. Some pupils attain GCSEs in mathematics, others achieve entry-level qualifications in English, science and other subjects. On leaving school, most pupils are offered college placements. The school has also developed partnerships with locally based companies, which have provided work-experience placements. Sponsored internships are currently being considered, with the prospect of future employment
- Robust systems are in place to track the progress pupils make and to set targets. Teachers regularly assess each pupil's progress. Senior leaders and subject coordinators check teachers' judgements to ensure that pupils are sufficiently challenged to make effective progress. Pupils' targets and work are also moderated in school and with other similar special schools to ensure consistency. Inspectors found occasional, minor inconsistencies in the way in which progress was assessed in science in Year 7 and English in Year 9.
- The school communicates very effectively with parents to engage them in their children's learning. Letters are sent home frequently, informing parents about school events, such as parents' evenings and annual reviews of pupils' education, health and care plans. Parents say that they feel able to ask the school for help because staff are helpful and friendly. The school employs a family support worker, who supports parents to improve their children's attendance and with other issues. Pupils' attendance is above that found in similar schools nationally. The school uses creative approaches to engage with parents, such as arranging 'pop-up' learning events in the local shopping centre. The purpose is partly to engage with those hard-to-reach parents who may find it difficult to attend meetings in school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the methods used for assessing pupils' progress are consistently applied across all year groups, particularly in science in Year 7 and in English in Year 9.

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

Yours sincerely

Julian Scholefield
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

- The inspectors had discussions with you and other senior and middle leaders, the chair of the governing body and two other governors, a range of teachers and teaching assistants and the school improvement advisor from the local authority.
- There were 48 responses to the questionnaire sent to parents and two responses on Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire.
- Lessons were observed in all year groups and in most classes.
- Inspectors sampled work in a range of subjects and observed behaviour around the academy. We considered responses to surveys from staff, parents and pupils.
- Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of school documentation provided by leaders, including that relating to behaviour, safeguarding, governance, self-evaluation and school improvement.