

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Miss Marianne Blake
Principal
Oxford Spires Academy
Glanville Road
Oxford
OX4 2AU

Dear Miss Blake

Short inspection of Oxford Spires Academy

Following my visit to the school on 28 November 2017 with Patrick Harty, 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment in September 2017, you have already begun to build on the very successful legacy of your predecessor. You have raised expectations even further and taken action to accelerate pupils' progress. Your leadership style has quickly gained the support of staff. They feel valued and empowered. Those who met with inspectors, and those who completed the staff survey, were remarkably positive about the school. All staff are proud to work at the school and feel that it is well led and managed.

Since the last inspection, the progress of pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, has remained consistently above the national average. There is now much greater consistency in achievement across different subject areas. Weaker areas, such as history and geography, have improved significantly as a result of improved teaching. Disadvantaged pupils make progress that is in line with that of other pupils nationally and, in English, progress is even more rapid. The large number of pupils who speak English as an additional language make strong progress and achieve outcomes in their GCSEs which are above the national averages.

The sustained improvement of the school has led to increasing confidence within the local community and increasing pupil numbers. Consequently, the school is now heavily oversubscribed. Almost all parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend the school to another parent.

Leaders are aware that as pupils' abilities on entry to Year 7 continue to rise, the amount of challenge provided through the curriculum needs to continually increase.

You are supported well by your senior leadership team and your middle leaders. Together, they are increasingly effective in ensuring that standards of teaching are consistently high. Leaders have prioritised and successfully tackled the challenge of recruiting and retaining high-quality staff. Leaders work effectively with local teacher-training providers and support new and more experienced staff with high-quality training. Leaders routinely coach teachers, and provide opportunities for them to work together to share what works best in lessons. Staff work effectively together, trialling new strategies to enable them to fully reflect on and improve their practice.

The atmosphere in your school is one of calm purpose and enjoyment of learning. Pupils' attendance is above the national average, and their behaviour in lessons and around the school is exemplary. They are kind and respectful towards each other, their teachers and visitors. Pupils are proud of their school and take good care of the environment. They appreciate the wide range of clubs and other activities on offer. This includes a large variety of opportunities for pupils to develop their musical, artistic and dramatic talents. In particular, the school's promotion of poetry is exceptional. Pupils are successful in a large number of national poetry competitions, and their published anthologies demonstrate the talents of pupils from a wide range of backgrounds.

You, your leadership team and governors are ambitious for the pupils and carefully consider their best interests in everything you do. Governors know the school very well and provide strong challenge and support to you and other leaders. The effectiveness of the governing body has been enhanced recently by the increased support provided by the academy sponsor. Together, they ensure that self-evaluation is robust and reliable.

Your school improvement plan comprehensively involves all stakeholders in planning for improvement. You are fully aware that pupils do not attain as well by the end of Year 11, and in the sixth form, in a small number of subjects as they do in others. You are tackling the underlying causes of this. You are also aware that some groups of pupils, including those from White British backgrounds, do not make as much progress as other pupils. You have identified sensible strategies to address this.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a strength of the school. Governors and the leadership team ensure that safeguarding arrangements are robust and rigorous. All staff and governors receive helpful training that ensures they know how to keep pupils safe from abuse, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism.

A dedicated and highly skilled team of pastoral staff works with determination and sensitivity alongside pupils, parents and external agencies to support pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Staff closely monitor pupils causing concern,

and interventions are meticulously recorded. Case studies discussed with inspectors showed evidence of timely actions and thorough liaison with external providers to ensure that pupils are kept safe.

Pupils told inspectors that staff are approachable and that they know an adult they can turn to if they have concerns. Pupils appreciate the concern that staff members have for their welfare and well-being. Parents say their children feel safe and are well cared for in school.

The curriculum prepares pupils well for managing their own safety. A comprehensive and well-structured programme of activities delivered through lessons, tutor time and assemblies supports pupils' personal development and welfare effectively. The pupils that inspectors spoke to had a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe online.

Inspection findings

- The first line of enquiry inspectors looked at was the level of stretch and challenge provided for the most able pupils. This was an area for improvement from the school's previous inspection in May 2013. The progress of this group was significantly below the national average in 2016. However, during the inspection, inspectors found evidence to verify leaders' assessments that the progress of most-able pupils is improving. Analysis of provisional GCSE outcomes for 2017 and the school's own assessment information indicate that the progress of most-able pupils is now at least in line both with the national average and the school's ambitious progress expectations. Teachers have high expectations, and provide pupils with challenging work in lessons. Most teachers use questioning well to challenge pupils and probe their understanding.
- Inspectors also focused on the effectiveness of how students are prepared for, and supported, in the sixth form. A-level outcomes have not been strong overall and there has been too much variability between subjects. Leaders are aware of the issues and have strengthened leadership in the sixth form so that student progress can be tracked more carefully. Students feel they are well supported by their teachers and receive helpful advice and guidance. Student attendance and retention rates are improving and more students are progressing to universities, including Oxbridge. Inspectors observed that students had very positive attitudes to learning and were appropriately challenged in lessons. However, outcomes are too varied, and, in some lessons, inspectors found inconsistency in teachers' expectations.
- In the past, some disadvantaged White British pupils have not achieved as well in their GCSE examinations as their peers. Leaders have prioritised increasing the progress of this group and it is now carefully tracked. Early indications are that the work of learning mentors is making a positive difference to pupils' progress, but leaders have only recently started to track the impact of their interventions. In the lessons they visited, inspectors did not detect any obvious differences between White British and other pupils in their attitudes to learning and progress.

However, the school's own assessment information shows that, while improving slightly, the progress of some White British pupils lags behind other pupils.

- Inspectors discussed with leaders their rationale for how the curriculum is organised and taught. Leaders have carefully balanced the needs of pupils with new school accountability measures. The curriculum has become more challenging and has a stronger academic focus to reflect pupils' higher starting points in Year 7. Leaders are confident with their decision to significantly increase the number of pupils studying humanities subjects in key stage 4, due to improved teaching and stronger outcomes.
- Leaders provided a strong justification for pupils studying a key stage 4 curriculum which lasts for three years. A broad and balanced curriculum has been maintained through the wide range of option choices available to students. Also, large numbers of pupils continue to benefit from access to optional subjects through the enrichment programme, even if they no longer study them after Year 8. Leaders will continue to keep the curriculum under close review to ensure that it best meets the needs of the pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they carefully monitor and evaluate the quality of support provided for disadvantaged pupils from White British backgrounds to ensure that it leads to improved progress
- the work to support the progress of each sixth-form student is consistent in all subjects, so that each student is stretched to achieve their best possible results.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Bagust
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, other leaders, governors and other staff. They spoke to groups of pupils, formally and informally. They visited 19 classes to observe learning, and looked at the quality of work in pupils' books. Inspectors observed pupils at breaktime and lunchtime. They considered documentary evidence, including that related to self-evaluation, safeguarding, progress of current pupils and the work of governors. The team took account of 147 responses to the Ofsted online survey, Parent View, and the outcomes of a staff survey (90 responses) and a pupil survey (353 responses).