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8 January 2016

Mr David Bell
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Dear Mr Bell

Short inspection of Joseph Whitaker School

Following my visit to the academy on 8 December 2015 with Clive Moss HMI, 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in November 2010.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the academy since the last inspection. Leaders have an accurate view of the areas of strength and those needing improvement across the academy. This is reflected in the academy's clear and detailed self-evaluation.

Since the last inspection, there has been staffing restructuring as well as changes to leadership on several occasions. Leaders have maintained a constant focus to make sure that the quality of teaching at the academy remains at least good overall.

You took up your post in September 2015. You were previously vice-principal at the academy, and you know the academy well. You acknowledge the drop in standards in 2014. The urgent actions leaders took in response led to improvements in 2015. The academy's own information about pupils' achievement, based on regular assessments, indicates that this improvement is set to continue at a faster rate.

Leaders form a close-knit team, with shared ambition and a collective focus on improving outcomes for pupils. You ensure that pupils combine attentiveness to their studies with developing a range of skills and experience so that they are well prepared to move on successfully to the next stage in their education.

You revised the academy's behaviour policy, introducing the 'consequences system', when you recognised that pupils' attitudes to learning were not always as positive as you expect. Pupils respond well to the system which includes scoring them for their attitudes to learning, as reflected by their effort, behaviour and homework. They are motivated by rewards of house points and prizes of donations to chosen charities. The system has helped to boost attendance and improve behaviour for those who have had difficulty being attentive in lessons. However, this approach is not used in all subjects.

Pupils are loyal to the academy and are proud to wear their uniform smartly. They have positive relations with their teachers and with each other. Pupils are responsive to their teachers' high expectations. Equally, teachers are very supportive of their pupils and respond quickly when pupils ask for extra support. As one pupil stated, 'you can't really ask too much'. Pupils are very clear about their targets and a greater focus on these in lessons has helped them to concentrate better on their work. You encourage your pupils to aim high as they plan their future education and careers. You nurture aspiration and leadership skills from the earliest opportunity. Pupils speak favourably of their visit to a local university to learn leadership skills to be used in running a club at the academy.

You have identified rightly when subject areas have needed strengthening, and your actions to develop leadership have led to improvements, including in mathematics and English. You appointed senior leaders to the roles of progress leaders for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 so that there is greater rigour to monitoring of the quality of teaching and more effective support for subject leadership. You have made sure that support is given to teachers when the quality of their teaching is less than good so that it improves. However, leadership of some subjects is still developing and is not yet strong enough to ensure that all teachers are held to account by subject leaders for the achievement of their pupils.

Leaders have adapted and introduced new policies and practice to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils compared with their peers. This is reflected in the academy commissioning an external review of the academy's use of pupil premium funding. The academy has acted swiftly on several recommendations. Importantly, this includes targeting the use of external funding much more effectively. While it is too early to see the full impact of these measures on closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged pupils and others, these measures have already made a positive difference to pupils, boosting their attendance and their attitudes to learning.

The sixth form continues to be a strength of the academy. Increasing numbers of the academy's pupils stay on in the sixth form and nearly all complete their courses successfully. Their teachers enable them to be well prepared to choose, and do well in, subjects that will help them to pursue the careers of their choice. Sixth formers develop study and work-related skills that will be an asset to them in their future employment.

Safeguarding is effective.

Staff are trained regularly and kept up to date with the latest guidance. They are currently progressing through 'Channel' training, which aims to help staff to protect pupils from the dangers of radicalisation and extremism.

The single central record meets requirements.

The academy has well-thought-out procedures for dealing with cases involving the highest level of need. Staff maintain thorough records and case studies of vulnerable pupils. Leaders and managers are astute in following up concerns. The processes for identifying and dealing with issues for concern are appropriate and well conceived.

Governors maintain a close view of the academy's work on safeguarding and are clear on, and fulfil, their responsibilities.

Pupils feel safe in the academy. They state that personal, social and health education lessons and themed days on topics such as sex and relationships education and drugs education have helped them to be confident in managing risks and keeping themselves safe.

Pupils interact productively in lessons and socialise positively at breaktimes. There are clear routines for pupils' arrival at the academy in the morning and at breaktimes, so that they are well supervised and on time for lessons.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have taken appropriate measures so that the quality of teaching remains mainly good in the academy. They help teachers who need to improve their teaching. For example, teachers take part in the academy's 'Good in Ten' personal coaching plan, so that their teaching improves.
- Leaders carry out regular monitoring of the quality of teaching. Their high expectations mean that the marking policy is used consistently. Pupils respond routinely and positively to written feedback from their teachers which helps them to make progress.
- Teachers demonstrate strong subject knowledge. Where teachers express passion for their subject, their pupils pick up on this and respond by being more motivated. This was especially seen in lessons in electronics, English and in the sixth form.
- In the best lessons, teachers make good use of questioning to develop pupils' answers, to recall and apply their learning from previous lessons and to boost their examination technique. In some instances, pupils, particularly boys, lack confidence in giving verbal responses. Teachers do not always provide sufficient guidance for pupils on how to respond using more formal, technical vocabulary.

- Pupils say that they are set homework regularly and they find it helpful. Pupils in Year 10 and Year 11 commented, 'it is just the right amount... a continuation of lessons which reinforces our learning'.
- Teachers' performance management targets explicitly refer to the achievement of disadvantaged pupils or disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs. This is helping to improve progress for these groups, but leaders acknowledge that they need to ensure that progress is further accelerated so that gaps close more quickly.
- The academy is tracking carefully the impact of interventions so that these can be refined as needed to make sure they are effective. 'Academic mentors' identify swiftly when pupils are underachieving so that pupils receive the help they need to catch up. The academic mentors regularly check on individual pupils to support them so they make better progress. As this scheme is proving to be so successful, it is being extended, with sixth form learners being trained to work with targeted pupils as academic mentors.
- The academy has good-quality arrangements for transition so that it can meet the needs of pupils from early stages.
- The academy maintains good links with outside agencies and local schools to see and develop good practice.
- Pupils say it is unusual for lessons to be interrupted by poor behaviour. When it happens, it is dealt with promptly and effectively by their teachers.
- Sixth form learners are impressively motivated and diligent. They willingly tackle challenging tasks and develop very competent study skills so they are prepared well for their next steps. All learners move on from the academy to the next stage in their education, to employment or to training.
- Sixth form learners thrive on additional responsibilities, for example being one of the 'red shirts', employed by the academy to assist with lunchtime supervision. They are positive role models for younger pupils, valued by the support staff they assist and appreciate the useful experience of the selection process, including completing a job application.

Next steps for the academy

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the effectiveness of the work to close the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and others, and disabled pupils and those with special educational needs and others, is accelerated
- leadership is developed further in those subject areas where it is needed, to ensure that all teachers are held to account by subject leaders for the achievement of their pupils
- the good practice seen in the academy to boost the motivation and enthusiasm of pupils, especially boys, in their studies is extended across all subjects.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Nottinghamshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Carter-Fraser
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you; senior leaders with responsibility for safeguarding and attendance; the special educational needs coordinator and the coordinator in charge of the pupil premium; the Chair of the Governing Body and the vice-chair; groups of pupils from all year groups; and the member of staff with responsibility for the administration of the single central record. Inspectors visited lessons to see the learning that was taking place, accompanied at different times by you, the vice-principal with responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning and the sixth form, and the senior leader with responsibility for progress and interventions in Key Stage 4. One inspector also observed sixth form learners in a training session to prepare them for work as academic mentors for younger pupils. Inspectors held informal conversations with pupils and members of staff as they toured the academy and looked at examples of pupils' work. Inspectors observed the behaviour of pupils at the start of the day, in and between lessons and at breaktimes. Inspectors looked at a range of documents, including the single central record, the academy's improvement plan and self-evaluation, records of the monitoring of the quality of teaching and the responses to questionnaires completed for the inspection by staff and parents.