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7 December 2015

Mrs Eleanor Benson
Headteacher
St Hilda's Church of England High School
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Dear Mrs Benson

Short inspection of St Hilda's Church of England High School

Following my visit to the school on 24 November 2015 with Patrick Geraghty 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 school was judged to be good in April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Along with senior leaders and governors, you have created a caring and nurturing culture, within which every pupil is encouraged to flourish. You used the areas of improvement in the last inspection report as a driver for sharpening the focus on every pupil making the best possible progress. Pupils and staff alike have risen to the challenge of the aspirational targets that are set. This has led to impressive outcomes in a range of subjects, including English and mathematics.

This is a school that values individuals. Its ethos recognises that everyone is different but equal. Pupils feel safe and valued for whom they are. This makes them comfortable and gives them confidence, for example, to be open about their sexuality or gender identity. This caring ethos is valued by both pupils and parents and contributes to pupils' high achievement. Pupils at St Hilda's are eager to learn and want to do well. They are polite and friendly and behave extremely well both in and out of lessons. Relationships between staff and pupils are very strong and based on mutual respect. Pupils look splendid in their uniform, which they wear with pride.

You know your school well. While rightly proud of your successes so far, you and your leadership team are acutely aware of the areas where there is further work to be done. You have not allowed the school to rest on its laurels following some very strong examination results, but focused attention on the few areas that are not yet good enough. The accelerated progress that pupils have made in science this year is evidence of the impact of the actions you have taken to improve outcomes in this subject. Enabling the most-able pupils to attain the highest possible grades is a continuing focus during professional development time as you recognise there is room for further improvement in this area.

You have closed achievement gaps successfully between disadvantaged pupils and their peers nationally. The most recent progress information shows that actions taken to close any remaining in-school gaps are making a difference. Since the last inspection, overall attendance has been above the national average. However, you are well aware that behind the positive headline figures, there is still concern about the attendance of some disadvantaged pupils.

You have maintained high standards across the school despite preparing for and re-locating to a brand-new school building. Staff and pupils are now enjoying the benefits of a high-quality learning environment. This has not been without its challenges, some of which will remain until the completion of the project in spring 2016. The lack of outdoor space for the pupils is one such challenge, but it is a mark of their maturity and positive attitude that this has not had a detrimental effect on their behaviour.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders are committed to safeguarding the young people in their care. Leadership of this area is very strong. Procedures to ensure all staff receive relevant training are robust, as are the protocols and practice for record-keeping. Staff have received a range of training on potential areas of risk for young people. The single central record is extremely well managed and fully meets all requirements. Pupils spoken to during the inspection say that they feel safe in school and know whom to go to if they have concerns. The school's own surveys indicate that this is true for pupils across all year groups.

Inspection findings

- Senior leaders ensure that all staff are focused on their pupils making the best possible progress. To this end, they set targets for all that are aspirational and challenging. Staff and pupils have risen to this challenge, and over the last two years, the number of pupils making and exceeding expected levels of progress in English and mathematics has compared favourably with national averages.
- Current information shows that the school is set to maintain these strong outcomes in English and mathematics as pupils in Years 10 and 11 are making good progress in these and other subjects. Modern foreign languages are a real strength of this school, with many pupils going on to attain the highest grades at GCSE and A level. Pupils also make particularly good progress in history, religious education and physical education. The significant proportion of pupils attaining the EBacc qualification reflects the school's commitment to high aspirations
- Leaders and governors are quick to recognise and tackle any areas of weakness. They invited a representative from the local authority to work with them to identify the reasons why pupils in science were not making as good progress as they were in the other core subjects. Actions taken include changes in leadership structures and assessment procedures, and as a result, pupils' progress has accelerated.
- As a result of focused professional development, the quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last inspection. Most pupils benefit from good and outstanding teaching which enables them to make good progress. However, leaders are aware that in a few lessons, the most-able pupils are not being challenged to achieve their best.
- Senior leaders ensure that middle leaders are focused on pupils making good progress in their subject area. Systems for assessment and monitoring of pupils' progress are robust. As a result, leaders across the school are able to track the progress of different groups of pupils and act quickly to tackle any underachievement. It is clear from pupils' books that they are acting on the advice given in written feedback, which is helping them to improve the quality of their work.
- Procedures for managing teachers' performance are rigorous, and used effectively to drive up standards in teaching and further improve outcomes for pupils. Governors are actively involved in this process, which they describe as, 'open, helpful and supportive'. Appropriate programmes of support and development are in place for the small number of cases where teaching is not consistently good.
- Overall attendance and persistent absence figures compare favourably with national averages. However, leaders are aware that too many disadvantaged pupils are regularly absent from school. They are working with them and their families to improve this situation. One strategy has been to provide bus passes, which has had a significant impact on increasing the attendance of these pupils. Leaders are also aware of the need to reduce the number of disadvantaged pupils who are being excluded for a fixed term.

- Pupils spoken to during the inspection speak highly of their teachers and the support they receive from them. They enjoy their learning, and feel safe and comfortable in school. On the rare occasions where bullying happens, they feel that staff sort it out quickly and effectively. These positive views are reflected in the school's own pupil surveys.
- The vast majority of parental comments received during the inspection were very positive, some offering high praise for how the school has helped their child to reach their full potential. Staff are also overwhelmingly positive about the school and the way it is led.
- The sixth form has many strengths. Learners make good progress with their studies, and the qualifications they achieve enable them to take up places in higher education or employment. They receive high-quality support and guidance, and benefit from a range of enrichment opportunities, including work experience. Leaders recognise where further improvement is required and have a clear action plan to bring this about, which has already had some impact. For example, attendance in Year 13 has improved significantly compared with the same time last year. While achievement in the sixth form is generally strong, leaders are aware that there is some variation in the quality of teaching and outcomes between subjects, and are taking action to tackle this.
- The governance of the school is strong. Governors are committed to the school and possess the required skills and expertise to both support and challenge senior and middle leaders effectively. They know the school well, and are focused on their core purpose of ensuring that all pupils achieve their full potential. They believe there has been a big cultural shift since the last inspection which means nobody is allowed to coast.
- A strong relationship exists between the school and the local authority. The representative from the local authority speaks highly of the senior leaders, praising their honest and reflective approach. She believes they know what needs to be done and have the capacity to lead the school to the next level. The school has benefited from local authority support in tackling the issues of underperformance in science.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the few remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and variations in outcomes between subjects are eradicated
- all teachers challenge the most-able pupils to achieve their best
- the number of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent and excluded for a fixed term is reduced further.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection we met with you and other senior leaders, six governors, including the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the local authority. We also spoke to the head of sixth form and staff with responsibility for safeguarding and attendance. Accompanied by senior leaders, we visited lessons to observe learning and to look at pupils' work. We met with two groups of pupils and spoke to others in lessons and around school. We looked at a range of documentation including: the school's self-evaluation; information about pupils' attainment and progress; pupil surveys; information about attendance and behaviour and documents relating to teachers' performance management. We considered the views and comments of 54 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and also took account of the 53 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.