

Blacon High School, A Specialist Sports College

Melbourne Avenue, Blacon, Cheshire CH1 5JH

Inspection dates 26–27 January 2016

Overall effectiveness **Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher, supported by very capable senior leaders and governors, is determined to make Blacon the best school it can be. As a result, key aspects of the school's work have improved significantly.
- Leaders and governors set appropriate priorities for the school's improvement, and check regularly to ensure that plans are on track.
- Subject leaders have good knowledge of the strengths and areas for improvement in their teams, so that teaching is good.
- Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good and well supported by the school's caring ethos.
- Pupils currently in the school are now making good progress in English and mathematics and in most other subjects.
- Previous gaps in progress between different groups of pupils are closing rapidly. Some disadvantaged pupils make better progress than others in the school.
- The progress of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is exceptionally good.
- Pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development are strengths of the school.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teaching is not yet outstanding because targets set for some pupils are not challenging enough.
- Outcomes for pupils are not outstanding because teachers do not use homework effectively enough.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve teaching and, thereby, outcomes for pupils by:
 - building on the outstanding teaching that already exists in the school, so that more pupils routinely experience appropriately challenging and inspiring teaching that allows them to make the best progress that they can
 - ensuring that teachers take greater account of homework in assessing and planning for pupils' progress, so that more pupils exceed the progress expected of them
 - ensuring that the targets set for pupils' progress in all subjects are always closely matched to the next steps in their learning so that they can move forward as soon as they are ready.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The headteacher is highly committed to achieving the very best outcomes for all pupils. She is relentless in her ambition to establish a culture which places pupils at the heart of everything that the school does. Senior leaders and governors share the headteacher's drive for the school's continuous improvement. Parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, were overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school's work, and would recommend the school to other parents.
- The school's self-evaluation processes are thorough and honest; they enable senior leaders and governors to act in a timely fashion when there is any underperformance. For example, senior leaders and governors have not shied away from moving teachers on if they fail to improve their practice, after sharply focused professional development. The impact of these measures is seen in improvements to the quality of teaching since the previous inspection.
- Teaching has also improved as a result of robust performance management systems, which are directly linked to pay progression.
- Middle leaders form an enthusiastic team and are committed to improving teaching in their departments. They greatly value the culture, established by the headteacher, of learning together through professional dialogue.
- Senior leaders and governors have ensured that the leadership of support provided for disabled pupils or those who have special educational or emotional needs is particularly effective. The impact of this high quality support is evident in the exceptionally good progress made by these pupils.
- The pupil premium funding is used wisely. (The pupil premium is additional government funding to help pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, and children who are looked after by the local authority.) The grant has funded a range of programmes to improve pupils' reading and writing. The success of these programmes is demonstrated by the good progress of this group of pupils and the narrowing of gaps in the standards that they reach.
- Leaders and governors ensure that the Year 7 catch-up funding is used to good effect to raise standards in literacy and numeracy, for those pupils who enter the school with attainment that is lower than average in English, mathematics or both subjects. The impact of this funding is evident in the quality of pupils' extended writing seen during the inspection.
- The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum, with a three-year Key Stage 4 to give pupils more time to develop their key skills. A variety of pathways and subjects meet pupils' needs well and pupils say that the careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) provided by the school helps them with GCSE option choices and decisions about their future studies or employment after Year 11.
- The impact of such advice and guidance is clear in the fact that all Year 11 pupils in 2015 went on to further education, training or employment after Year 11. Pupils enjoy a rich variety of after-school activities every day, including sports, music, revision and subject clubs and all pupils must choose at least one.
- The curriculum offers many opportunities for the development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. Tutor time is well used to promote pupils' interest in world affairs. Pupils are knowledgeable, for example about conflicts in the Middle East and the risks of radicalisation.
- Pupils understand fundamental British values of tolerance, democracy and personal freedom, for example through membership of the School Parliament. They learn to be very accepting of people of different faiths and cultures and are well prepared for the diversity of life in modern Britain, for example through visits to a Sikh Gurdwara (place of worship).
- The school makes very limited use of alternative provision at a local pupil referral unit. There is very close communication between the school and the unit to ensure pupils' regular attendance, good behaviour and progress.
- The school's partnerships and increasingly close working relationships with other local schools, for example through the Blacon Educational Village Partnership, are a strength that promotes a very smooth transition for pupils from Year 6 into Year 7. The school has drawn wisely on the expertise of the local authority and from external consultants to improve aspects of the school's work. The school has close links with a range of outside agencies to support pupils' physical, emotional and mental health.

■ The governance of the school:

- Governors share the headteacher’s ambition for the school. They bring to the leadership and management of the school a wealth of professional experience and expertise and a strong loyalty to the school. Governors are confident and knowledgeable about the quality of teaching and pupils’ progress and this equips them well to support the school and mount a very robust challenge to senior leaders. Governors are vigilant in managing the school’s finances, especially the pupil premium funding, and check very thoroughly that this funding has clear impact on the progress of disadvantaged pupils. The quality of governors’ work can be seen in the improved outcomes for these pupils.
- Governors have a good understanding of the school’s performance and its day-to-day work. They manage the headteacher’s performance well and hold middle leaders to account for pupils’ progress.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Good systems are in place to secure the well-being and safety of pupils. All staff and governors receive regular, high-quality training and carry out the school’s policy and procedures well.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Almost all teaching over time is good. Teachers know their pupils’ strengths and weaknesses well and most have high expectations of pupils. Staff use their specialist subject knowledge to good effect to plan and teach interesting and engaging lessons.
- Teaching in English is effective and supports pupils’ good progress. Strong systems are in place to support teachers’ assessment of pupils’ work, and appropriate support is given for any pupils who lag behind. The impact of the school’s work to improve pupils’ writing is evident in the increasingly sophisticated language and structures that pupil can use as they move up the school. Homework set in English is meaningful and extends pupils’ learning.
- Following disappointing results and rates of progress in the past, teaching of mathematics has been improved. Teachers are visibly enthusiastic for the subject and now provide a wide variety of challenging tasks that capture pupils’ interest and stretch the most-able pupils. Teachers are confident to adapt their plans in light of pupils’ responses and swiftly provide individual support for those who struggle. As a result, current pupils are performing better in mathematics than in the past.
- Strengths in the teaching of mathematics include the teachers’ visible enthusiasm for the subject and the wide variety of challenging tasks that capture pupils’ interest and stretch the most-able pupils. Teachers are confident to adapt their plans in light of pupils’ responses and swiftly provide individual support for those who struggle.
- Where learning is most effective, teachers ensure that all pupils learn rapidly by ensuring that all tasks are at the right level for them. They check pupils’ understanding frequently, for instance, using probing questioning skilfully to promote pupils’ deep thinking and enable them to work out answers to problems for themselves.
- In a minority of lessons, these strong features are not as well developed. Homework does not routinely extend learning beyond the classroom and some pupils, particularly the most able, do not always make as much progress as they could, because the work provided is too easy or too hard for them. Most teachers regularly assess pupils’ progress but there is variation between departments and teachers in the sharpness of target setting for pupils. Consequently, not all pupils are challenged to improve as much as they could.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school’s work to promote pupils’ personal development and welfare is good. The school cares a great deal about pupils’ achievement and personal development and therefore working relationships between staff and pupils are very strong. Some pupils told inspectors how much they value the extra time and one-to-one coaching that teachers willingly provide in their own time.
- Pupils are safe and secure in the school. Excellent systems are in place to offer help and support to vulnerable pupils, sometimes involving external agencies when appropriate. An overwhelming majority of parents responding to Parent View agreed that their children are well looked after at school and that their

children are happy there.

- Pupils value the opportunities that they have to learn about keeping themselves safe, in and around the school as well as online. Learning about e-safety is given an appropriately high priority.
- Pupils say that they are well taught about different kinds of bullying, including prejudice-based bullying. They told inspectors that bullying is rare and that there is a range of trusted adults who will handle any situations promptly. Pupils are clear that prejudice-based language is unacceptable and that both they and their teachers would challenge it if it occurred.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils are polite and respectful to each other, staff and visitors and forge strongly positive relationships with their teachers and each other. They know the standards expected of them and take pride in their uniform and their school.
- The behaviour in lessons and around the school is good. Pupils are punctual and come to lessons well equipped and ready to learn. The vast majority of pupils are keen and attentive in class and disruption is rare.
- Pupils bring very positive attitudes to their learning, but they are sometimes a little reticent in expressing their ideas and opinions in class. Teachers are skilled in encouraging pupils to participate through a range of imaginative strategies, but there is more work to be done to develop pupils' confidence further.
- Attendance has improved dramatically since the previous inspection, from being in the lowest 10% of all maintained schools in 2014 to just below the national average. This is a significant achievement and a testament to the relentless work of the attendance team, which has spared no effort in working with families who find it difficult to secure their children's regular attendance. The school recognises that there is more work to do to reduce persistent absence.
- Exclusions for poor behaviour are falling quickly and are only used sparingly and as a last resort.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Pupils enter the school with standards that are significantly below the national average and with significant deficits in reading and especially in writing.
- While there were some dips in performance in the GCSE results in 2015, compared to 2014, there were also some strong improvements. Groups whose outcomes were previously significantly below average made progress that was at least in line with the national expectations and sometimes higher.
- Overall, expected progress in English and the progress of middle ability pupils was in line with the national average for the third consecutive year. Girls' progress in mathematics was also in line with national averages. Gaps in expected progress in mathematics narrowed for high-ability pupils and other measures of progress improved for girls and middle ability pupils. Languages and humanities also improved, as well as the proportions of pupils who achieved the English Baccalaureate. Gaps between the standards reached by the most able and middle ability disadvantaged pupils narrowed compared with the standards reached by other pupils.
- In 2015, the progress of all pupils in mathematics was significantly below average. The proportion of pupils who exceeded the progress expected of them in both English and mathematics was also significantly below average.
- Previously, other national measures of progress showed low scores for all pupils: the disadvantaged, high ability pupils and some who have special educational needs. In the two years since the previous inspection in 2013, senior leaders have taken very effective steps to secure good outcomes for pupils. As a result, current pupils in Key Stage 4 (Year 9 to Year 11) continue to make good overall progress across a range of subjects.
- The school's tracking against the new Progress 8 measure shows that almost all groups of pupils (disadvantaged, disabled or those who have special educational needs and the most able) are achieving positive scores, and that gaps in progress are narrowing quickly.
- Work in books at Key Stage 4 shows the impact, across subjects, of the school's strong focus on literacy. Teachers pay particularly close attention to developing pupils' literacy skills as well as their understanding of subject content in science and humanities and, as a result, pupils clearly develop a wider vocabulary and more sophisticated language structures.

- Current pupils in Key Stage 3 (Years 7 and 8) make good progress in their understanding of the key concepts of subjects, and are increasingly confident to tackle more challenging content in mathematics.
- Outcomes are now good in most subject areas. Where they are not, teachers provide a range of helpful support and guidance for any who lag behind. However, the most-able pupils are not always routinely stretched by the work and targets set for them and more could be done to ensure that more of this group attain the highest grades.

School details

Unique reference number	111396
Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	10002270

This inspection was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation Trust
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	395
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr D Peachey
Headteacher	Mrs Susan Yates
Telephone number	01244 371 475
Website	http://www.blaconhighschool.net
Email address	admin@blaconhigh.cheshire.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	5–6 November 2013

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average secondary school. Numbers on roll have been declining for three years but the roll is now beginning to increase.
- The majority of pupils are of White British heritage and very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The school makes limited use of The Bridge Alternative Provision Academy.
- There are slightly more boys than girls.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is twice the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who are disabled or who have special educational needs is well above average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors gathered a wide range of evidence during the inspection, including through observations of teaching, some of which were undertaken jointly with senior leaders.
- Inspectors also considered a wide range of pupils' written work.
- Inspectors analysed 49 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 44 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents. It was not possible to access pupils' responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire. Inspectors spoke instead with pupils in formal interviews and lessons and informally at lunchtime and breaktimes. They also considered the school's own surveys of the views of the same groups.
- Meetings were held with school staff, including the headteacher and other senior and middle leaders. Inspectors also met members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. The lead inspector also spoke by telephone with an external consultant about the school's work.
- Inspectors also visited an assembly.

Inspection team

Susan Wareing, lead inspector

Liz Kelly

Christine Veitch

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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Manchester
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