

Tribal
Kings Orchard, One Queen
Street, Bristol
BS2 0HQ

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5323
Direct email: suzy.smith@tribalgroup.com

7 May 2015

Mr P Smart
The Castle School
Park Road
Thornbury
Bristol
BS35 1HT

Dear Mr Smart

No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Castle School

Following my visit with David Edwards Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 6 May 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management, including governance at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised action plans and other documents relating to the arrangements for disadvantaged students. They met groups of students from Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, and the sixth form to discuss their work and experiences at school. They met with academy leaders, safeguarding leaders, nine teachers, a group of parents, the Chair of the Governing Body and chair of the learning and outcomes committee and the chief executive officer of the multi academy trust to discuss the provision for disadvantaged students. An inspector held telephone conversations with the virtual headteacher of the children in care of the local authority and the school improvement adviser. The inspectors visited eight lessons, scrutinised students' work, and student case studies. Inspectors checked the single central record, safer recruitment arrangements, and attendance records.

Context

The school is much bigger than the average-sized secondary school and has a large sixth form. It is part of a multi academy trust. A local governing body provides oversight of the school's work. The school operates across two sites, half a mile

apart, with the smaller site primarily serving as a sixth form centre. The school converted to an academy in March 2013. The headteacher was appointed in September 2014. Students are mostly White British. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is below average at around 10%. The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is broadly average.

Main findings

You demonstrate absolute commitment to ensuring the same high level of achievement for disadvantaged students as of all others. Staff, governors, local authority officers and local business leaders are galvanised to make the achievement of this group their number one priority. You have directly challenged them to adjust their systems and processes to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. The impact on the students' attitudes to learning, their academic achievement, access to education and aspirations are improving quickly. Good practice in meeting these students' needs is embedded into the life of the school and is benefiting all students.

Your action plan has clear priorities for improvement drawn from a broad evidence base. This usefully includes case studies of individual students and the analysis of how students have achieved in each subject in recent years. The rationale behind each priority is clearly understood and the checks that actions are securing the desired impact, in the short term and long term, are reliable. The academy trust board maintains effective strategic oversight of the developments.

The arrangements for collecting data on students' progress have been sharpened up. You insist that year group leaders and subject leaders review and analyse the academic achievements of disadvantaged students at regular intervals. These leaders meet with you to explain where there are successes and how to develop provision. By all accounts these meetings are challenging and the urgency to get immediate improvement is clear to all.

The recording system does not capture adequately the gaps disadvantaged students have in their subject knowledge and skills. The records do not make clear, attainment in all aspects of literacy or the extent of students' fluency in mathematics. Many of these gaps have occurred because of missed schooling, some weaker teaching and past underachievement in lessons. Some of these gaps are being tackled through additional lessons and additional help provided in lessons by adults, but this is not systematic and still leaves too much to chance.

The tracking systems are being effectively expanded to ensure staff have all the information on students' needs and how to meet these. Leaders are working closely with the local authority and carers to collect comprehensive information about the children in care of the local authority. The student mentor puts this information to good use to help target students' attendance and manage student anxiety. Gathering this information has engaged all staff, including those working with vulnerable students, into strategic decision making. For example, an audit into the personal, social, health and economic development of disadvantaged students

prompted a particular piece of work to address the gaps in their awareness of on-line grooming.

There are common features in all the lessons observed during the visit that benefit the learning of disadvantaged students. These reflect the improvements you sought following an extensive review of the learning of this group of students in autumn 2014. That report captures clearly where teaching must improve if the learning is to be of the highest quality for this group, no matter what their starting points. A programme of professional development and sharing of best practice is improving the quality of teaching.

The interactions between teachers and the disadvantaged students are not ensuring that teachers know how well the students are learning or maintaining a high enough level of engagement with the learning. There were some good examples of teachers involving disadvantaged students in discussions. In a mathematics lesson, the questions raised by the disadvantaged students helped the teacher recognise a misunderstanding. The teacher used the subsequent responses to steer some highly effective teaching that benefited all the students. This example is not yet typical.

Teachers prepare carefully for lessons, giving consideration to the resources the students require to help them. The provision of additional workbooks, so there are no excuses if they are left at home, is a good example of how teachers are tackling this barrier to learning. The teachers pay particular attention to the language on hand-outs and look to provide a variety of examples to help students identify the standard they are expected to reach in their work. Teachers are marking the work of these students closely and provide clear messages on how the students should improve in order to reach the high expectations set.

Teachers are managing behaviour in their lessons well. Effective information sharing results in teachers understanding students better than before. This, in turn, strengthens the relationships between student and teacher. There is a noticeable reduction in instances of poor behaviour resulting in missed lessons or exclusion from school.

There is targeted support from additional adults, who are well briefed by the teachers on the help to give and when to expect more independence. The extra adults are good at encouraging students to work collaboratively and this ensures greater engagement in the lesson for those who have found this hard previously.

The overall attendance, of disadvantaged students, for the last two years has been poor as it is significantly lower than that of other groups. It is improving and the gap between the attendance of disadvantaged students and their peers has closed to within five percentage points. Disadvantaged students are still more likely to miss school than others. There are too many 'stuck' cases and a few students still take too many days off school for reasons which are not fully explained.

Effective use is made of the pupil premium and bursaries for students attending the sixth form. The funds are used to provide extra lessons in literacy and numeracy,

additional staffing, provision of clubs, uniform and travel costs. The students report the additional funding for activity days, trips and revision materials has helped relationships, engagement and attitude to school. You and the governor responsible for disadvantaged students are thoroughly checking at regular intervals on the impact of the spending to see if the students are benefiting academically and socially. Parents are kept informed of the additional provision that is being made for their child and are very positive about the impact it is having.

You have high expectations of the quality of transition between primary and secondary school and between secondary school and further education. Governors have supported you well in this, directing funding and giving of their own time to meet school leaders and business leaders to help improve the process. Students speak positively about how the programme of careers advice and independent guidance is meeting their needs, irrespective of their academic ability. More able disadvantaged students in Key Stage 4 are encouraged to aim for places at the top universities and funding is used to help this, for example with travel costs.

Strong links are being forged with primary schools to gain a fuller picture than before of disadvantaged students' experiences and interests. The links are proving beneficial in identifying the practice that has led to good progress for these students during their primary school years. This is helping the Year 7 leaders direct the students' mentors to help these students through their first year. The mentors are encouraging these students to manage their subject workloads, take part in the clubs and enrichment the school has to offer, and build links between home and school.

External support

The school improvement adviser for the multi academy trust has provided the guidance and expertise in reviewing all aspects of the provision for disadvantaged students. This helped the school evaluate accurately the reasons for this group of students' underachievement. Working closely alongside school leaders, the adviser regularly reviews the impact of developments, challenging the school to maintain the pace of change.

The local authority virtual headteacher for children in care has forged strong links with the school. This is enabling a successful transition programme for looked after students. The supervision of the arrangements by the local authority is very thorough.

Ten of the 40 local businesses that work with the school as premium partners have turned their attention to the future destinations of disadvantaged students. The group works with school leaders to create worthwhile and credible activities that broaden their experiences of work and education. The businesses play a significant role in helping disadvantaged students choose the right courses for future employment, as well as the experiences of preparing for interviews. They provide work experiences to disadvantaged students in Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 that are close to home, so minimising the travel arrangements. There are good examples

where local businesses provide vocational placements for the disadvantaged students in the sixth form who have still to gain the required level of skills in literacy and numeracy.

The strengths in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- strategic planning to raise achievement
- working with partners to raise aspirations and expectations
- effective use of the additional adults and other resources in lessons
- providing advice and guidance through the marking of students' work.

The weaknesses in the school's approaches to supporting its disadvantaged pupils effectively to achieve their potential are:

- precisely identifying the shortcomings in students' skills, knowledge and understanding
- not all lessons encourage disadvantaged students to get involved in discussing their learning
- teachers are not always checking their understanding during lessons
- effectively tackling the persistent absence of a minority of students.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop assessment and tracking to identify the gaps in students' literacy and numeracy skills.
- Ensure more focused questioning of disadvantaged students to check on their understanding and the progress they are making during lessons.
- Robustly challenge the reasons given for absence.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for South Gloucestershire, to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Education Funding Agency (EFA). This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Palk
Her Majesty's Inspector