

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



21 April 2016

Mr John Marston
Headteacher
St Birinus School
Mereland Road
Didcot
Oxon
OX11 8AZ

Dear Mr Marston

Short inspection of St Birinus School

Following my visit to your school on 22 March 2016, 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 January 2012.

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 2015 you have taken robust action to improve aspects of the school which needed immediate attention. You are admired by both pupils and staff, who respond well to your drive and strong sense of moral purpose. You are 'inspiring excellence' in all those around you. You and the executive headteacher have worked well together to improve behaviour across the school. You are raising expectations of all staff about what pupils can achieve, and as a result standards are rising. While some parents were not happy with aspects of the school in the past, they are supportive of you and they describe you as 'full of energy, enthusiasm and passion' and say that school leaders 'are now making a real difference'. As a result, the school is a safe, calm and well-ordered environment.

You, the executive headteacher and other leaders have rightly focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning and raising standards. Consequently, teaching remains good. This is particularly the case in the sixth form, in English and in mathematics. As a result, more pupils are now achieving better than the standards expected at the end of key stage 4 and key stage 5 and current information shows that this improving trend is set to continue. In addition the gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others narrowed significantly last year

so that these pupils now make similar progress to other pupils nationally. However, in a few subjects, pupils do not make as much progress and this is especially the case in modern foreign languages and in humanities subjects.

Your school joined with Didcot Girls' School in September 2015 to form a multi-academy trust, the Didcot Academy of Schools. Subsequently, you and other leaders have worked well with other leaders in the trust. You have also entered into useful partnerships with the local teaching alliance and national organisations to raise standards further. In September 2015, for example, you identified that some middle leaders were not completely confident in judging the quality of teaching in their subject areas. A leader from your partner school in the trust supported middle leaders with coaching and training. Consequently, middle leaders are now much more effective and robust in evaluating the quality of the work of their teams. However, you recognise that some middle leaders would benefit from additional guidance to improve aspects of their practice still further.

You have created a productive and committed team in the face of considerable recruitment challenges. You and your team are passionate and ambitious to improve the school rapidly so that it is as successful as the other trust school, which was recently judged to be outstanding by Ofsted. Following your guidance, leaders are now using pupil information more effectively to improve teaching and learning. You have introduced a more professional approach to managing teachers' performance and created effective ways for leaders to share the most effective practice in the school. As a result, staff are committed to improving their practice and report that they are well supported by both middle and senior leaders.

Leaders have tackled both of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection effectively.

- You have introduced a new system that all teachers use well to plan activities that help pupils learn. Teachers effectively stretch and challenge pupils to do their best. Most pupils are confident about whether they are on track to achieve their target grade and if not what they need to do to improve. However, leaders' evaluation of these procedures shows that a few teachers and some pupils are not using it as well as you want them to.
- Leaders have tackled attendance robustly. Overall attendance has improved over the last three years and the number of pupils who attend irregularly has also decreased. However, your evaluation shows that a few pupils are still not attending school enough and that the overall rate of attendance needs to improve further.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are safe and well cared for in the school. There are good procedures in place and policies are regularly reviewed; record-keeping is comprehensive and all staff training is up to date. Governors are also appropriately trained and knowledgeable about safeguarding, meeting regularly with school staff so that they have good oversight of the procedures and practices in place. As a result, the vast majority of parents overwhelmingly report that the pupils are well cared for

with one parent of a pupil commenting that 'staff really do go the extra mile for the pupils'.

Inspection findings

- You, your leaders and governors are ambitious and are clear that there are still improvements you need to make. You and other leaders know the school well and accurately evaluate its strengths and areas that require further attention. Your improvement plan is useful and sets out clearly where you expect to be by the end of the year and addresses the less effective areas of the school well. Your leaders at all levels contributed to the plan and are therefore clear about what part they play in raising standards at the school.
- You, with the support of the executive headteacher and staff from the other trust school, have improved the way you monitor aspects of the school's work. The new approach to monitoring teaching and learning is robust so that staff are now much clearer about what they need to do to improve. The executive headteacher is working very effectively with you and other leaders in a carefully planned and proportionate way. This means that you and your leaders are well supported by the trust to raise standards rapidly.
- The new approach to planning is well developed and although the new system for checking pupils' progress is relatively new, staff are increasingly using both systems well to sharpen their practice.
- Governors are increasingly effective. They recognised that in order for the school to improve further, they needed to forge a partnership with Didcot Girls' School. Following the development of the multi-academy trust, governors are now well supported and are more focused on challenging and supporting the new headteacher and other leaders better. Governors are knowledgeable about key aspects of the school's work and are making good use of the additional expertise available across both schools.
- The achievement of pupils in most subjects improved in 2015. Standards in many subjects are above the national average for boys and this is especially the case for English and mathematics. In 2015 in the sixth form learners achieved well in a wide range of subjects, and in mathematics and business they achieved significantly above the national average.
- Where achievement was low in languages and humanities, it is now improving because you have taken appropriate steps to sharpen leadership and the quality of teaching. Current information shows that pupils are now making more progress in Spanish as well as French.
- The most-able pupils achieved more of the highest grades in 2015 in science, mathematics and French than previously. The performance of current pupils is improving with more pupils expected to achieve the highest grades in a wider range of subjects. However, you and the executive headteacher have identified that some middle leaders would benefit from sharing best practice from across the trust to ensure that more pupils attain the highest grades.

- The standards in mathematics continue to be very high. The majority of pupils make similar or better rates of progress than their peers nationally. Standards in English remain high but as a result of early entry, the rate of progress for most pupils is broadly in line with the national average for all pupils. Current information shows that pupils in English are now working well and a higher proportion than last year are achieving expected or better than expected progress.
- In 2015, disadvantaged pupils made similar or better rates of progress compared with other pupils nationally in English and mathematics. This improving trend is continuing with the current pupils in Year 11 achieving similarly to their peers. Overall, disadvantaged pupils in the school are doing well and achievement information shows that where there are gaps in achievement, these are narrowing rapidly.
- There are a wide range of strategies to support disadvantaged pupils in place. Staff are well aware of what works best to raise these pupils' achievement and this work is regularly reviewed and fine-tuned by leaders and governors. Middle leaders are especially confident about this aspect of their work as they have usefully shared their best approaches with each other.
- Teaching is effective in the majority of subjects and is very effective in the sixth form. Leaders have introduced a range of useful strategies to improve the quality of learning in classrooms. Teachers use these strategies well so that pupils work hard and try their best. The majority of teachers are using the school's planning systems soundly and know their pupils well. Work is generally well adapted to meet the needs of different pupils but the most-able pupils' depth and mastery of some subjects, especially in humanities, is not as well developed.
- Exclusions have fallen over the past few years and pupils who need additional help to behave well are well supported. Leaders have taken decisive action to address parental concerns from the previous year and pupils say that now far fewer pupils stop others from learning than before.
- Behaviour around the school is good. Movement around the school is calm, pupils at break and lunchtimes are well behaved and there is little damage or litter seen in the buildings. Pupils were confident to share their views with visitors and were polite and cheerful. On the whole, pupils wear their uniform well but a few pupils struggle to knot their ties smartly enough.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the overall attendance of all pupils increases and especially of those few that are frequently absent
- they further develop their approaches to share best practice between middle leaders so that pupils in all subjects learn well

- the quality of pupils' learning in modern languages and humanities is brought up to the good standard evident in many other 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 Oxfordshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Seamus Murphy
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Two inspectors visited the school for one day. There were meetings with you and your senior team, governors, middle leaders, pupils and the academy trust executive headteacher. Policies relating to safeguarding, your own analyses of pupils' achievement and other documents were scrutinised. Inspectors made brief visits to 22 lessons to see teaching and learning. They paid particular attention to how well pupils eligible for the pupil premium and the most able were learning. Responses to Parent View were analysed.