

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ms Tina Owen
Headteacher
Philips High School
Higher Lane
Whitefield
Manchester
M45 7PH

Dear Ms Owen

Short inspection of Philips High School

Following my visit to the school on 28 February 2017 with David Hampson, Ofsted Inspector, 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

You and your leadership team have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You joined the school as headteacher in April 2016 and have driven far-reaching improvements throughout the school. In a short time, you have increased the effectiveness of leadership at all levels. You have challenged senior leaders to develop the breadth of their work and they have risen to the challenge. You have increased the expectations of middle leaders and they value their greater involvement in monitoring the quality of teaching and the faith you have shown in them to improve outcomes. You have established a culture of high expectations in which all staff are supported effectively to work towards the school's aim of every pupil becoming a 'star'.

You have ensured that leaders at all levels understand the strengths and weaknesses in their areas so that they can take appropriate action to make improvements. Improvement planning is more coherent so that everyone's efforts directly contribute to the school's overarching priorities. Almost all staff who completed the questionnaire say that they understand the school's aims and you ensure that the school's collaborative, respectful and aspirational values permeate all aspects of its work.

In your efforts to coordinate the different branches of the school's work, plans for improvement have become unwieldy and lacking in precision. The use of targets based on pupils' achievement or personal development would help leaders to measure the impact of different actions and facilitate a more secure understanding of how much progress is being made.

You and your leadership team have taken effective action to address the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Leadership of teaching is a real strength of the school. Most impressively, a variety of mechanisms have been introduced to share good practice. You hold events to share ideas with colleagues from other schools and maintain a stimulating climate that encourages teachers to take risks and experiment. You have developed a new marking and feedback policy which ensures that pupils respond meaningfully to feedback provided by their teachers. As a result, improvements to teaching are providing a strong contribution to pupils making accelerated progress across the curriculum.

Despite these actions, you acknowledge that there is still too much variability in the quality of teaching. You have worked in tandem with the local authority to secure support from specialist leaders of education (SLEs). In English and mathematics, improvements have been accelerated due to external support. You have recently enlisted the help of an SLE to improve teaching in geography and leaders are committed to securing further improvements to teaching within humanities.

Pupils are positive about recent changes. They value the focus on improving behaviour and say that bullying and prejudicial behaviour rarely take place. Pupils appreciate the school's 'Respect' campaign and respond positively to the focus on promoting equality and highlighting the harmful consequences of discrimination. As a result, pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. Many pupils embrace the school's efforts to promote good attendance. They talk enthusiastically about the rewards available for regularly attending school and recognise that the school's focus on improving attendance has sharpened. Despite this, the school's overall attendance rates do not yet show overall improvement compared with last year. In particular, too many disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities continue to be regularly absent from school. You have therefore intensified your efforts to make improvements in this area and there is evidence to indicate that rates of absence are declining this term.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding are effective. You have recently updated your safeguarding policy and the new policy is thorough and robust. Staff receive regular training on a range of relevant safeguarding issues and they are alert to signs of abuse and neglect. Concerns are passed to the safeguarding team with an appropriate sense of urgency and record keeping is efficient and detailed. You have been keen to build capacity in this area and a number of staff have received higher levels of training. As a result, the proactive safeguarding lead person is now ably supported by a wider team whose members work collaboratively to secure the best outcomes for the physical and mental well-being of pupils.

The school supports pupils to keep themselves safe effectively. Pupils appreciate the days that are dedicated to helping them develop an age-appropriate understanding of risk. They find the information they are provided with on topics such as alcohol, relationships and mental health to be very helpful. They also value the work the school does to help them keep safe when online.

Inspection findings

- Pupils are making consistently strong progress across the curriculum and throughout the school. Outcomes are therefore improving after a period of decline.
- Leaders have ensured that there is a concerted focus on supporting disadvantaged pupils, boys and middle-ability pupils. Information provided by leaders indicates that disadvantaged pupils are making the fastest progress of any group in school. As a result, the difference in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and that of others is diminishing rapidly. Boys and middle-ability pupils are also making significantly faster gains in their learning.
- Leaders have demonstrated an ability to quicken progress in curriculum areas where progress has been weaker, particularly in history, computer science, graphic products and food technology.
- Leaders have introduced new systems for managing behaviour that have secured tangible improvements. Pupils are focused in lessons and conduct themselves in a mature and courteous manner around the site. Rates of exclusion have declined markedly and leaders are having a positive impact on improving the behaviour of pupils who have presented challenges in the past.
- Leaders' efforts to improve attendance have not yet secured overall improvements in the rate of absence, although evidence indicates that these efforts are beginning to secure improvements. Attendance has improved for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils has yet to improve.
- Teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve and provide work that is well matched to their needs. They use questioning skilfully to assess pupils' understanding and develop their thinking. Leaders have decreased the variability in teaching, but recognise that small pockets of less effective teaching remain, particularly in humanities.
- Governors support the school capably and have managed the transition to the new headteacher expertly. They are fiercely committed to the school and have used the disappointment caused by declining outcomes as a catalyst for re-evaluating their own effectiveness. As a result, they have increased the rigour with which they hold leaders to account. They have also extended the scope of their own training to ensure that they have a deep and accurate understanding of the school's effectiveness.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- effective action is taken to reduce rates of absence, particularly among disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
- plans to improve the school at all levels include clear targets, based on pupils' outcomes, that will enable leaders to measure the impact of different actions and make necessary changes to future planning
- recent improvements to teaching are consolidated and built upon, particularly in humanities.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Bury. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors undertook learning walks and observed teaching and learning in different subjects across the school. Meetings took place with you, senior and middle leaders, members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority, the school effectiveness partner and groups of pupils. Informal discussions were held with pupils to gather their views on behaviour and learning.

Inspectors scrutinised the work in pupils' books during lessons. Inspectors examined a range of supporting documentation, such as the school's self-evaluation and action plan and looked at the school's website.

Inspectors took into account 27 responses to the online parent questionnaire, along with 57 responses to the pupil questionnaire and 41 responses to the staff questionnaire. Inspectors also took into account 25 responses to Ofsted's free-text service for parents.