

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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29 May 2018

Mr David Lees  
Headteacher  
Beccles Free School  
Castle Hill  
Beccles  
Suffolk  
NR34 7BQ

Dear Mr Lees

### **Short inspection of Beccles Free School**

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 2018 with Gerard Batty, 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 May 2014.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Following disappointing results in 2016, pupils achieved highly last year. The progress they made was significantly above national figures and placed the school in the top 10% of schools across the country. The school's 'raising attainment plan' has ensured, among other things, that leaders at all levels now take greater responsibility for pupils' progress. Your improved monitoring systems have helped you to identify more quickly pupils who fall behind, so you can provide appropriate support. This is working, and outcomes rose sharply for the vast majority of pupils last year. Leaders spend additional funding effectively and last year disadvantaged pupils made significantly better progress than other pupils nationally. Current pupils say that they now benefit from increasingly 'good teaching and enjoyable lessons'.

Lessons are predominantly lively and engaging. Where practice is most effective, it is characterised by teachers' good subject knowledge and high expectations being used well to plan work that pupils find challenging. Pupils' pride in their work is evident and they respond articulately to teachers' probing questions, using technical vocabulary accurately. Teachers' in-depth knowledge of the pupils they teach enables them to plan activities and organise groupings carefully, by using a wide range of approaches to meet pupils' needs well. Pupils respond positively by displaying mature attitudes to learning and they appreciate, and act upon, the guidance from their teachers on how to improve their work. As a result, the vast majority of pupils develop their knowledge, skills and understanding well. For example, pupils in a Year 7 drama lesson could articulately describe how facial

expressions are varied to portray different feelings, while Year 10 pupils in mathematics could confidently convert recurring decimals into fractions.

Effective teaching has led to significant improvements in pupils' progress, especially in English. Inspection evidence shows that the gains are built on long-term improvements, and not quick wins. Pupils make better progress because teachers are experienced, knowledgeable, meticulous in their planning, and have high expectations of what pupils can do. Innovative teaching enables pupils to extend their knowledge and understanding rapidly. For example, Year 9 pupils could effectively analyse the language and structure of a Lady Macbeth extract, while discussing how the portrayal differed from the conventional role of women in 17th-century Britain. The secure foundations on which improvements are based, and the work in current pupils' books, indicate that the gains made last year are both sustainable and embedded.

Everyone connected with the school is proud of its distinctive ethos, nurturing environment, curriculum tailored to the needs of its pupils, and a wide-ranging enrichment programme. Visitors receive a friendly welcome and both inspectors immediately saw the strong and purposeful relationships that exist between staff and pupils, based on cooperation, humour and respect. Meal times are a wonderful social occasion; the behaviour in the dinner hall was exemplary. The trust places great emphasis on the importance of healthy diets and the benefits of staff and pupils eating together. Staff act as positive role models, preparing pupils well for when they leave the school. Pupils confirmed this to be the case and described their school as a 'community built on cooperation and positivity where staff are caring and attentive'. Parents appreciate the efforts made by staff to provide 'an atmosphere of constant inspiration that leads to happy, confident and fulfilled young people'.

The trust board has reviewed the school management structure whereby you very recently became headteacher of Beccles alongside your existing headteacher role at another school in the same trust. You and your senior leadership team have an accurate view of the strengths and areas for development at the school.

You are very well supported by the trust and, with the assistance of the trust leadership group, are looking to build on the many strengths within the school by seeking ways to improve further. The streamlined behaviour and attendance systems you have already introduced are a case in point, and both show signs of early impact.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff receive appropriate training and know what to do if they have concerns about the safety of any pupil in their care. Referrals are dealt with quickly and effectively to mitigate the risks to pupils' safety.

Pupils feel safe, and told inspectors how the school helps them to stay safe. They are aware of the different types of bullying, including cyber bullying, and say that

staff in the school are 'readily available, attentive, and deal with any incidents quickly and effectively'.

The overwhelming majority of parents agree that their children are safe, happy and well cared for. Leaders, governors and trustees ensure that safeguarding practice and the well-being of pupils are a key priority for the school. They monitor practice thoroughly, including through link governor unannounced safeguarding checks.

## **Inspection findings**

- The inspection was steered by three key lines of enquiry to check whether the school remains good. The first issue looked at whether boys make good progress. This was because the published performance information from last year showed that boys in Year 11 made significantly less progress than girls. Leaders rightly have made this one of their priorities in their 'raising attainment plan' and have taken swift action to reduce the gap in achievement between boys and girls.
- Leaders have introduced an incentive scheme to motivate and reward all pupils, but especially boys. Revision champion awards are now in place, overseen by positive role models, to help boys revise better, work harder and achieve well. In some subjects, boys are now starting to outperform girls, and across the curriculum the difference in progress between boys and girls has reduced significantly.
- All pupils are given greater choice in the subjects they study. This has increased pupils' engagement and ensured that timetables are more personalised. Staff in most subjects display an in-depth knowledge of what prevents pupils from learning effectively and plan activities to meet pupils' needs. Staff training has included looking at how to keep boys motivated, while not reducing the level of challenge or complexity of the work. Inspectors noted staff successfully using quick-fire activities with time limits to keep boys motivated. The school's own information now shows that a far higher proportion of boys are on track to achieve their target grades.
- Improved support packages are in place to help pupils who face difficulties in coping with the increased level of difficulty of the work. Far more boys across all year groups are now rising to the challenge and achieving well. However, in a few subjects, where work is not matched closely enough to pupils' needs, progress slows and pupils, mainly boys, do not achieve as well as they could.
- My second line of enquiry looked at the actions you are taking to ensure that all pupils attend well and exclusions are reduced. The leadership team has taken effective action, through its increased focus on good attendance and tightening of procedures to reduce absence. Existing actions will be further enhanced from September when additional staff will provide extra support to carry out this work.
- Currently, staff monitor attendance more systematically and home-school communication, including home visits, is more frequent. Additionally, the increased use of fixed-penalty notices and the greater involvement of the education welfare officer is leading to pupils attending more often. Pupils say that they enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in the increased levels of attendance this year.

However, the overall attendance is still slightly below the national average, and you realise that close monitoring of some key groups remains essential.

- You were aware of the need to reduce exclusion, and have plans to change the pastoral structure. You have also introduced a new behaviour policy in a bid to simplify processes and ensure greater consistency. The 'restore and review' sessions between the teachers and pupils has seen an improvement in pupils' behaviour. In fact, there are now more positive than negative events being recorded. Although the full impact of your actions is yet to be seen, you are confident that future exclusions will be greatly reduced once new systems are fully established.
- My third line of enquiry looked at the actions that leaders have taken to improve the progress pupils make in modern foreign languages. While pupils' progress across almost all subject areas increased significantly last year, standards in modern foreign languages lagged behind. You were aware of the issues and this also featured on your improvement plan. Consequently, there have been changes in staffing, and the examinations that Year 11 pupils sit this year will be the first under the guidance of their new teachers.
- Alongside the increased scrutiny at school, local advisory board and trust level, additional support packages and detailed action plans to improve pupils' outcomes are in place. This includes additional staff to help pupils in lessons, and specialist additional support for pupils during tutor time. Your effective actions are starting to see improvements. Inspectors noted teachers' high expectations, well-planned lessons, and challenging material, allowing pupils to discuss ideas in French using high-level vocabulary. Pupils say that they are learning more, and the work in pupils' books shows that they are now making better progress over time.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they maintain their focus on raising attendance so that pupils' overall attendance, including that for specific groups, is at least in line with national averages.
- the excellent practice seen in some subjects is shared more widely to improve pupils' engagement, particularly that of boys, in a few subject areas.
- the improvements being seen in teaching and learning result in better published progress figures for modern foreign languages, and for boys compared to girls.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local advisory board, the chair of the Seckford Foundation Free Schools Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Suffolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Randall  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, we met with you, and some of your other senior and middle leaders, a member of the local advisory body and two trustees, and two groups of pupils. We observed a wide range of lessons to see pupils at work. We reviewed school documents about self-evaluation and development planning, safeguarding including the single central record, and attendance and behaviour records. There were no responses to either the staff or pupil online surveys. We also considered the 48 responses by parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View.