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21 March 2018

Mr Michael Simpson
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Dear Mr Simpson

Short inspection of Holywell School

Following my visit to the school on 6 March 2018 with Phillip Barr, 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 October 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You are rightly proud of the impact of your school's values-driven philosophy. Your values, including tolerance, forgiveness and kindness, are displayed prominently around the school site and they permeate the school's ethos through assemblies, charity work and roles such as values ambassador. Pupils speak very proudly of the impact of these values on both themselves and the school. They say that the school's values make them think and act more thoughtfully and positively as well as making the school a better place.

You have high expectations of staff and pupils. You have taken decisive action since your appointment in September 2017 to review the organisation of the senior leadership team and to introduce new, more rigorous approaches to monitoring, evaluation and improvement planning. As a consequence, leaders have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they should expect of others. You are currently implementing a number of important developments, such as a new assessment system, that are rightly focused on your evaluation of the school's priorities. You acknowledge that it is still too early to see the full impact of these actions.

Pupils are well behaved and have very positive attitudes to learning. They are proud of their school and they are excellent ambassadors both in and out of the

classroom. They value the high quality of teaching, from which they benefit, and they welcome the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities available to them. Pupils' positive views of the school are shared both by their parents and your staff. An overwhelming majority of staff who completed the Ofsted questionnaire state that they are proud to work at the school, while a very high proportion of parents say that the school is well led and that they would recommend it to others.

Leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and they are committed to its continued improvement. As a consequence, the quality of teaching has improved since the school's previous inspection. Pupils value the enhanced support that they are now given by teachers to improve their work and this has had a marked and positive impact upon their progress. You acknowledge that, although approaches to homework have improved since the previous inspection, a further review of the school's current homework policy is needed.

Governors provide you with support and accountability. They know the school well and are passionate about its inclusive approach to education. Governors provide challenge through their various committees, full governing body meetings and visits to the school. They are keen to review their approaches to school visits to enable them to link more closely with school leaders. You, leaders and governors are in agreement about the need to ensure that disadvantaged pupils' progress continues to improve and that these pupils attend school more regularly. You also acknowledge the need to embed your new approaches to assessment, so that they further accelerate pupils' progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Pupils are unanimous about the fact that they are safe at school, as are all of the staff and parents who responded to the Ofsted surveys. Pupils say that, on the rare occasions it happens, bullying is dealt with swiftly and effectively. They state that they attend a caring school and that there is always someone to help them if needed. They value their personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum that covers topics such as sex and relationships education, e-safety and bullying.

Governors have a clear understanding of their safeguarding duties and they are effective in carrying them out. Leaders undertake all appropriate recruitment checks and ensure that staff are well trained and know how to identify any signs that pupils are at risk. Staff understand the school's systems for reporting concerns and they state that safeguarding is a fundamental part of the school's culture. Safeguarding records are well kept and any child protection referrals are monitored robustly.

Inspection findings

- We pursued a number of lines of enquiry to ascertain whether the school continues to be good. Our first question related to the extent to which the quality

of teaching is improving and its impact on the progress of the most able pupils.

- Leaders have improved the quality of teaching since the previous inspection through a combination of effective training, collaborative work with other local schools, increased expectations and greater consistency among teachers. Teachers' strengths and weaknesses are now evaluated using a wider range of evidence and training is tailored to teachers' individual needs. As a result of close monitoring and support, leaders accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching. They demonstrate impact when helping teachers to improve their practice.
- As a result of leaders' actions, the overall progress of the most able pupils currently in the school is good and improving. Where progress is particularly strong it is as a result of planned learning activities that are closely linked to the most able pupils' starting points and where teachers' deep subject knowledge enables them to question the most able pupils critically and challenge their thinking. High-quality relationships between the most able pupils and their teachers mean that they are confident to take advice from their teachers and make further improvements to their work.
- The most able pupils' improving progress over time is seen in regular assessments that are benchmarked against other pupils nationally with similar starting points. The work in the most able pupils' books also demonstrates that they are making good overall progress. However, there are examples, both in lessons and in the most able pupils' books, where their progress is less rapid. The most able pupils say that, occasionally, tasks in lessons and homework can be repetitive or lack challenge.
- A second line of enquiry related to the impact of leaders' actions to improve progress in mathematics at key stage 2. Effective leadership, monitoring and support of both staff and pupils has resulted in pupils making improved progress in this area. Pupils have a clear understanding of what they are studying and how it fits into the mathematics curriculum.
- The standard of work in pupils' mathematics books is high and leaders' assessment policies are implemented consistently. As a result, pupils benefit significantly from the conversations that they have with their teachers that outline their strengths, weaknesses and targets for improvement. Teachers' subject knowledge and questioning are a particular strength. From when they join the school, pupils make at least good overall progress by the end of key stage 2 and this continues through to the end of Year 8.
- Finally, we wanted to check how effective leaders have been in their work to improve the progress, attendance and behaviour of disadvantaged pupils. Through carefully planned strategies, strong pastoral care and the establishment of high expectations, leaders have been successful in their actions to improve the behaviour of disadvantaged pupils. Disadvantaged pupils display the same very positive attitudes to learning as their non-disadvantaged peers. The number of disadvantaged pupils receiving fixed-term exclusions is low.
- Leaders' work to reduce the absence of disadvantaged pupils has been less successful. The absence rate of this group of pupils remains higher than both

their non-disadvantaged peers within the school and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. There has been a reduction in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent from school but it is still high. Leaders acknowledge the link between attending school and making good progress. Although leaders are able to demonstrate the improving progress of many disadvantaged pupils, their progress is less consistent than their non-disadvantaged peers.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they further reduce the differences in progress and absence between disadvantaged pupils and all pupils nationally
- the recent changes made to assessment systems are embedded, so that pupils' progress is further accelerated.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the director of education for the Diocese of St Albans, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Daniel Gee
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, school leaders, other school staff, trustees and groups of pupils. Together with you and other school leaders, we made short visits to a wide range of classes to observe teaching, look at pupils' books and to see pupils at work. We reviewed school documents about self-evaluation, development planning and safeguarding, including the single central record and records of child protection. We also considered the 81 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, from parents and the 31 responses from staff to the Ofsted questionnaire.