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15 January 2016

Mr Terry James
Headteacher
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Dear Mr James

Short inspection of Queens' School

Following my visit to the academy on 15 December 2015, accompanied by Paul O'Shea, 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 second short inspection carried out since the academy was judged to be good in April 2012. The academy was also subject to a pilot short inspection in November 2014.

This academy continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the academy since the last inspection. Senior leaders work well together as a team. These colleagues are highly regarded by other members of staff and together form a team that is committed to driving academy improvement. As headteacher, you regularly share your skills and expertise by working with other schools in the Greater London area to help them develop their leadership.

You and other leaders have put the quality of teaching in the academy at the top of your agenda. You encourage healthy debates about what works well and what does not. All staff regularly discuss successful teaching strategies and are encouraged to share these at every opportunity. Teachers are eager to develop good practice so that subjects that perform less well can improve.

Despite being the largest secondary school in Hertfordshire, you and other leaders have succeeded in creating a happy and friendly school community where pupils are treated as individuals. Pupils particularly value the house system which brings pupils of all ages together to celebrate their achievements. Pupils told me they appreciate the 'warmth of the house system' and the fact that 'you never feel alone here because everyone looks after you'. This is an academy which not only promotes pupils' academic achievements but also focuses on each pupil's overall development.

Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the academy and the learning culture you have established over the years. Yours is a popular academy that is always heavily oversubscribed when parents apply for a place for their child.

Pupils are clearly proud of their academy and enjoy their learning. They achieve well overall, although some of your most-able pupils could achieve more top grades at GCSE than they do currently. Pupils enjoy reading. Lessons provide several opportunities for them to read aloud and to broaden their range of vocabulary. They are becoming articulate, young individuals who can present an argument well. Consequently, many participate in your debating society and achieve success in regional competitions.

You develop pupils' leadership skills well by providing them with a wide range of responsibilities. They feel they have a strong voice in the academy and that their views are valued. Sixth form pupils make a positive contribution towards the 'community culture' you have established. They willingly support younger pupils in their studies and in their extra-curricular activities, and are excellent role models to their peers.

Safeguarding is effective.

The academy's leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and effective. Records are detailed and of high quality. You and the academy's governors have ensured that arrangements to keep pupils safe are strong and effective. There are stringent processes in place to ensure that the suitability of staff is checked thoroughly before an appointment to the academy is made.

The designated child protection officer has developed an effective internal team to support children. The academy has worked hard to underpin its effective work with vulnerable children through the development of good working relationships with families. Case studies presented by the academy were thorough and demonstrated the academy's commitment to caring for every pupil, even when they are being educated elsewhere. Pupils confirm the good quality of care and support they receive, and are confident that they can trust staff to deal with any concerns they may have.

Inspection findings

- Pupils typically enter the academy with significantly high levels of prior attainment. Leaders have maintained the high levels of attainment achieved by pupils as they progress through the academy and reach the end of Key Stage 4. The proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics in 2015 was well above the national average.
- Your self-evaluation documents and academy improvement plan are closely linked. Your evaluation of the academy's strengths and weaknesses is

accurate and honest. Similarly, heads of department can point to areas where they have made gains, and aspects which still need to be improved. Although pupils' progress in science at Key Stage 4 has been an area of concern for some time, you have strengthened the capacity at leadership level by appointing both a director and a head of science. You are also aware of pupils' underachievement in computing, and information and communications technology, and are taking appropriate action to tackle this.

- Pupils make good progress in English and mathematics and across a range of other subjects. Pupils' progress in science has not been as strong for a few years, and slowed down in humanities subjects in 2015. Leaders have looked into why this has happened and provided inspectors with plausible explanations. Subject improvement plans include suitable strategies as to how to accelerate pupils' progress. Achievement information, as well as inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' books in science and humanities, indicate that the academy has managed to reverse this decline in pupils' rate of progress.
- Academy leaders are aware of the variation in achievement between some subjects both at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. They are also aware of the need to increase the proportion of pupils who achieve A* and A grades at GCSE at the end of Year 11. Subject leaders carefully analyse pupils' outcomes and track their progress on a regular basis. Your systems for assessing pupils' prior attainment when they join the academy are developing so that you can set them challenging targets. Senior leaders hold subject leaders to account well through their regular meetings in which they provide an appropriate balance of challenge and support.
- You have worked hard to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and those who are disabled or who have special educational needs. The recently appointed special educational needs coordinator and her deputy have quickly adapted to their roles and track effectively the progress of pupils who have special educational needs. The few disadvantaged pupils you have in the academy achieve well, and you have succeeded in ensuring that they make better progress in English compared with other pupils nationally. The gap between disadvantaged pupils in the academy and other pupils nationally is closing in mathematics. You have put a range of appropriate strategies in place to ensure that these gaps continue to close. You have made good use of sixth form pupils as mentors, as well as providing one-to-one support and group work for pupils who need extra help.
- You maintain a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching in the academy. Through your 'teaching and learning communities', which are popular with members of staff, you have targeted key aspects of teaching in order to improve outcomes. Your in-school publication 'Queens' Tales' highlights a range of approaches which you encourage teachers to adopt and then share. Consequently, teaching continues to improve. However, sometimes pupils are not provided with work that challenges them.
- Pupils' work is marked frequently by the great majority of teachers. A very few do not mark pupils' work according to your marking policy, and the quality of their written feedback does not always help pupils move up to the next level of attainment. However, when this is done well, it clearly helps pupils to understand where they have made errors and to put them right

next time. The academy admits an above-average proportion of most-able pupils compared with most other schools. A few teachers do not sufficiently take account of the fact that even when pupils are not in a top set, they are still very able.

- Pupils now better understand your revised rewards and sanctions system. You adopted a zero tolerance approach towards poor behaviour because you wanted greater consistency in teachers' implementation of the sanctions system. As a result, the number of recorded incidents of unacceptable behaviour spiked temporarily. However, this system has now become embedded and, consequently, the number of pupils who receive after-school detentions or who are excluded from school has been significantly reduced. A very small minority of pupils continue to show low-level disruptive behaviour in some lessons, typically when the quality of teaching is less than consistently good.
- You have improved the attendance of pupils who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs by working closely with their families and involving a number of external agencies. This work has significantly reduced these groups' rates of absence and persistent absence. Because they attend academy more regularly, this has had a positive impact on their outcomes.
- Although pupils achieve well overall in the sixth form, you recognised the fact that too few were achieving a pass grade at advanced level, for example in mathematics. This was because you allowed too many pupils to start courses for which they were not suitable. You have now revised your admissions criteria and have adopted a stricter approach towards allowing pupils to start post-16 courses, while at the same time counselling other pupils towards a more appropriate programme of study.

Next steps for the academy

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the variation in achievement across subjects both at GCSE and at post-16 level is reduced
- a greater proportion of most-able pupils achieve the top grades at GCSE
- all teachers have equally high expectations of all pupils, no matter what ability group they are part of
- the small amount of low-level disruptive behaviour that still exists is eliminated.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteachers and other senior leaders, heads of department, the special educational needs coordinator and her deputy, and the chair and other members of the governing body. Inspectors met with groups of pupils and spoke with other pupils throughout the day. Inspectors looked at responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. They observed teaching and learning in lessons jointly with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, looked at pupils' books and scrutinised a range of academy documents.