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Mrs T Newton
Headteacher
Woodlands Academy of Learning
Bloxwich Road North
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Dear Mrs Newton

Short inspection of Woodlands Academy of Learning

Following my visit to the school on 11 July 2017, 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

You and governors have recruited a group of highly skilled senior leaders. Leaders exhibit strong knowledge and skills across every phase of the school. You and senior leaders demonstrate capacity for further improvement. Children's learning is at the heart of your school improvement work.

You and governors have established a clear vision and set of values for the school. Your vision is underpinned by 'SMILE': seize every moment; make a difference; inspire inquisitive minds; learning for life; and enjoyment and laughter. Your whole school community is very proud of these values and they are readily displayed in learning across the school.

Your development of the curriculum is a key strength. The WACI (Woodland's adventurous, creative and innovative) curriculum has been devised to offer engaging and memorable experiences for children. You and staff are focused on strengthening pupils' skills across the curriculum. This is evident in Year 2 through pupils' exploration of seaside resorts and in the Year 3 project on Aztecs. Pupils throughout the school are keen to share their learning and have a clear understanding of the skills that they are developing.

There is a strong culture of learning at Woodlands. You have instilled high expectations in your workforce. Staff that I spoke to enjoy coming to work and appreciate the support and guidance that they are given. One member of staff commented, 'It is fabulous working here. We are all going in the same direction.' This view is typical of wider feedback I received from staff. Of the 42 staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire, all said that they feel that they have a clear understanding of the school's goals and that the organisation is well led and managed.

The school environment is very well organised and staff at every level are welcoming. Parents that I spoke to are appreciative of the support they receive and your open-door policy. The vast majority of parents that responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend the school. One parent stated, 'My child enjoys going to school. There is always a smile to greet him of a morning.' This view is typical of the feedback I also received from families on the playground. However, a small number of parents raised concerns about pupils' behaviour via Ofsted's free text service. These concerns were explored with leaders and it is clear that the school is committed to listening and acting on feedback. During the inspection, the behaviour and conduct of pupils was strong.

At the last inspection, the school was asked to: create more opportunities for children in the early years to explore their own interests; increase opportunities for the most able pupils to tackle open-ended writing tasks; and provide pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities with more varied open-ended tasks.

The early years team has considerable enthusiasm and passion. Team members have made changes to the indoor and outdoor environment to better meet the needs of children. As a result of effective leadership and teaching, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development has risen for the past three years. The early years team has paid particular attention to supporting children's speech and language needs.

Establishing challenge and securing learning at a greater depth have been a clear focus of staff training. The school's own assessment information and work in books show that pupils are working at a greater depth in their learning. The most able pupils are receiving a higher level of challenge, but there is scope for this area of improvement to be developed even more.

Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are tracked and supported to ensure that they make progress. Assessment information shows strong rates of progress for this group of pupils. Leaders conduct regular pupil progress meetings with teachers to check on pupils' performance. These meetings demonstrate the extent to which leaders establish high expectations and hold teachers to account.

You and senior leaders acknowledge that there is further work to do in developing the overall teaching of reading and the quality of teachers' questioning.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding at Woodlands. Systems for recording any concerns are detailed and well organised. Staff that I spoke to in early years are well aware of their statutory responsibilities and have a good understanding of the signs of different forms of abuse.

The curriculum has been designed to incorporate regular opportunities for pupils to learn about how to stay safe. There is a strong emphasis on e-safety. The school makes full and effective use of the skills of serving police officers on the governing body. This has included talks about road safety and the risks associated with the internet.

Inspection findings

At the start of the inspection, we reviewed your school self-evaluation. During our discussions, we agreed key lines of enquiry to ascertain the extent to which Woodlands has sustained a good standard of education. The first key lines of enquiry we explored were the effectiveness of safeguarding and current rates of attendance.

- In 2016, the proportion of sessions missed by pupils, and levels of persistent absenteeism, were slightly higher than national. As a result of your work, attendance has improved and is now above the national average. Moreover, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils has improved considerably. Your work with families and local agencies has more than halved the overall level of persistent absenteeism for the whole school. This marks a considerable improvement and is something you are keen to sustain.
- Though outcomes in key stage 2 were strong last year, outcomes in key stage 1 were weaker. We carefully scrutinised the progress that current Year 3 pupils are making, by checking your assessment information and reviewing learning in books. Rates of progress have improved, and a higher proportion of pupils are now at age-related expectations. This improvement is a result of your strong tracking and effective support.
- You have improved the overall quality of teaching across the school. Teachers respond positively and quickly to the feedback and support that you provide. You recently focused your monitoring on the impact of the teaching of reading. Though you have secured improvement in this area, there remain inconsistencies in the use of assessment. The strong teaching of reading that is evident in some year groups has not yet been shared widely enough.
- The impact of pupil premium funding is tracked meticulously. Every disadvantaged pupil is tracked individually. Where leaders find any underachievement, additional support is devised. As a result of leaders' effective use of assessment, disadvantaged pupils are making strong rates of progress. Pupil premium funding is also used well in the early years to address quickly any emerging barriers to learning.

- Assessment information is used effectively across the school. Leaders and governors are very clear about the progress that different groups of pupils are making. Teachers know pupils' needs well and are regularly held to account for pupils' progress in dedicated meetings. Your rigorous approach to assessment allows you to respond quickly to any trends or differences in achievement.
- Teachers' planning reflects the needs of the most able pupils and builds in additional challenges and questions. However, there is some variability in the quality of teachers' questioning. Pupils are not routinely given sufficient time to reflect on and respond to the questions that they are asked in lessons. On occasion, some tasks are too easy for the most able pupils.
- Governors have a strong set of skills and have commissioned a review of their work to further improve their effectiveness. Many have experience in education and wider community roles. They provide challenge to leaders and have a clear understanding of the strengths and priorities of the school.
- External support is effective. The local authority's commissioned adviser meets with leaders regularly. The adviser has worked with the school to develop teaching, learning and assessment, and specific approaches to intervention and additional support. Advice has been well received and leaders deliver any necessary actions with pace.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most effective teaching and assessment of reading are shared more widely so that rates of progress continue to rise
- teachers' questioning skills are developed further so that pupils are given adequate time to reflect and respond
- teachers' planning secures an even greater level of challenge for the most able pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Keay
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and senior leaders to review the school's self-evaluation and school action plans. We agreed key lines of enquiry and inspection activity. I conducted lesson observations and books scrutiny across key stage 1 and Year 3. These activities were undertaken jointly with leaders.

I met with the school's business manager to review the single central record. I held a meeting with you and the pupil welfare leader to discuss safeguarding arrangements. I reviewed a range of documents including training records, child protection files, case studies, pupil education plans, policies relating to supporting pupils with medical needs, care plans and risk assessments.

I met with six governors, including the chair and vice-chair of governors. I met with the local authority's commissioned school improvement adviser.

I took account of the 39 responses to Parent View and 21 free text responses submitted by parents online during the inspection. I reviewed the 28 responses from pupils and 42 responses from staff to Ofsted's questionnaires.