

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



8 February 2017

Mrs Catherine Smart
Executive Headteacher
Potton Middle School
Mill Lane
Potton
Sandy
SG19 2PG

Dear Mrs Smart

Short inspection of Potton Middle School

Following my visit to the school on 26 January 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

Pupils learn within a calm and purposeful environment. They attend regularly and punctually, are smartly dressed, and speak confidently and articulately. They apply themselves to their work with enthusiasm and diligence. Pupils' relationships with each other, and with their teachers, are highly positive. Disruption to learning is rare. Pupils listen to each other's ideas respectfully and respond to them thoughtfully. Teachers demonstrate their own belief in the school's motto, that 'every child can', by challenging pupils to do better. Teachers encourage pupils to take a pride in what they do. They are not content with work that is second best. Pupils respond by presenting their work neatly and completing tasks fully. They show a high degree of interest in what they are learning. This is because of leaders' changes to what is taught, when, and how it is taught. However, pupils complete investigative work in the sciences too infrequently.

Pupils' progress has accelerated rapidly, particularly within English and mathematics, since your appointment as executive headteacher in September 2015, after a period of turbulence in leadership. You and your senior leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. You are working effectively as a team to drive forward the necessary improvements and maintain aspects of strength, such as pupils' ability in reading, as demonstrated by their performance in the key stage 2 national tests.

At the time of the previous inspection, pupils did not always complete work that was challenging enough to help them take the next steps in their learning, or know how to meet their targets. During this inspection, scrutiny of pupils' work indicated that most of the time, the tasks that they complete are, as one pupil put it, 'not too easy, or too difficult, but just hard enough'. Teachers' regular and precise feedback makes clear to pupils how they can improve their work. Pupils appreciate this guidance, and the time they are given to make the changes. During this inspection, pupils indicated that they usually know what they need to do to improve, and how to do so. They respond determinedly and most move forward quickly. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making good progress because teachers and others provide them with effective support. The impact of appropriate challenge and precise feedback on pupils' rates of progress is most evident within English, mathematics and science. Instability within the staffing of humanities subjects has meant that improvements within geography and history have been less marked.

Leaders have worked effectively to improve pupils' ability to write at length and for different purposes, with an accurate command of spelling, punctuation and grammar. This has had particular impact upon the quality of written work produced by the most able pupils in English, though improvement is less evident within other subjects as pupils complete fewer 'big write' tasks in those.

Disadvantaged pupils have typically made less progress than others with similar starting points since the previous inspection. Leaders are tackling this effectively and these differences are diminishing. This is because disadvantaged pupils attend well, and are given effective support that helps them to improve aspects of their work that they find difficult.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that there is a culture of safeguarding within the school. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Pupils feel safe, and are confident that unacceptable behaviour, including bullying, is rare and dealt with effectively when it does occur. The curriculum helps them to understand and manage risks, such as those involving the use of social networking sites. Staff are swift in identifying and acting upon any concerns that they have about individuals; they work effectively with external agencies so that pupils get the help that they need quickly.

Inspection findings

- Pupils' attendance, having declined since the last inspection, was one of my key lines of enquiry to ascertain whether the school remained good. Attendance is now rising and in line with the national average. This is because you and other leaders have worked effectively to reinforce parents' understanding of the impact of low attendance upon the progress their children make. Leaders celebrate pupils whose attendance is high or improving, and act quickly when any individual's attendance begins to decline. Leaders' work with the local authority's

attendance officer helps to get most pupils back in to school before patterns of absence become entrenched. Teachers make sure that pupils who have been absent catch up the work that they have missed. This minimises the impact of absence on their progress.

- At the previous inspection, inspectors found that, too often, pupils completed work that was too easy or too difficult for them. Consequently, this was a further line of enquiry. My evidence shows that leaders have acted to ensure that pupils complete appropriately challenging work. Teachers assess pupils' work regularly and accurately. They use this information to identify individuals who need extra help, or additional challenge. Teachers provide this support, and ensure that pupils complete 'close the gap' tasks that help them correct mistakes. The most able pupils are given additional work to do that extends their thinking, or that helps them to apply the skills they have learned to problem-solving exercises. Work in pupils' books, particularly within English and mathematics, demonstrates that all groups of pupils are making progress lesson by lesson. Their progress over time, at key stage 3, has been less rapid within the humanities subjects.
- Since the previous inspection, disadvantaged pupils have often made less progress, and enjoyed less positive outcomes, than other pupils with similar starting points nationally. Evidence, from my next line of enquiry relating to this, demonstrates that these differences are now diminishing. This is because teachers monitor pupils' progress very carefully, and provide swift support which prevents individuals from falling far behind. The appointment of an additional teacher has increased the amount of support available to pupils who need it. Extra tuition is effective because teachers focus upon the precise aspects of knowledge or skills that a pupil needs to develop or improve. Leaders monitor the impact of this support closely and ensure that those who need it benefit from ongoing intensive help.
- My final line of enquiry was to check that teaching is helping all groups of pupils to do as well as they can in their writing, particularly boys and the most able girls. Leaders have acted to help pupils improve the quality of their extended written work. In English, for example, pupils plan such tasks carefully, and re-draft them after receiving feedback. This process has helped the most able, in particular, to craft compelling narratives, communicated with powerful and highly imaginative description. Pupils have fewer opportunities to develop their extended writing skills in science and the humanities subjects.
- Leaders have made considerable changes to the curriculum since the previous inspection in order to ensure that pupils complete work that engages them, and that prepares them well for the next stage in their education. Pupils benefit because they study a wide range of subjects, many of which are taught by subject specialists. They are able, for example, to produce expressive art work that is visually powerful and to learn about key world faiths. Pupils made clear, during this inspection, that they find the work that they complete very interesting, and that the expert subject knowledge of specialist teachers helps them to learn. By the time they leave for upper school, at the end of Year 8, they are well prepared to continue their learning in most subjects. At present, however, they have limited opportunity to complete investigative work within science.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that pupils:

- make as much progress at key stage 3 in the humanities subjects as they do in English and mathematics
- complete appropriate extended writing tasks across the curriculum, so that they develop their ability to communicate their knowledge, understanding and ideas fully within different subject areas
- undertake regular investigative work in science.

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

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the deputy headteacher and other members of your leadership team to discuss progress since the previous inspection. I held a meeting with teachers and middle leaders, who have responsibility for leading English and mathematics, to discuss outcomes for pupils and the impact of decisions leaders have made. I met with a group of governors including the chair of the governing body, external advisers who have supported the school's work, and a group of pupils selected by you from all year groups. I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, and information relating to attendance. We both undertook observations of learning across the school, viewed work in pupils' books, and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons. I analysed 54 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online parental questionnaire.