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Mr Simon Rogers
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Dear Mr Rogers

Short inspection of Walsall Academy

Following my visit with Julie Griffiths, Ofsted Inspector, to the academy on 25 February 2016, 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 academy was judged to be good in April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the academy since the previous inspection. Since you took up post in April 2015, you have continued to build upon the positive improvements undertaken by the previous headteacher, and have set out your ambitions for Walsall Academy to become an outstanding school in all aspects of its provision.

Your vision is that pupils achieve their 'personal best' through their academic accomplishments and through their acquisition of the skills and aptitudes that they need to become successful learners and responsible citizens on leaving the academy. You are going a long way in realising these ambitions and are well supported by a capable leadership team and your staff. The academy is a calm and cohesive community in which pupils and teachers are focused purposefully on learning and improvement. Pupils enjoy an impressive range of opportunities that nurture their wider skills and ensure that they have high aspirations. These include your rich and diverse offer of extra-curricular activities, performing arts and sporting opportunities, leadership and enterprise programmes, outdoor learning and international visits. The academy's success is demonstrated in pupils' very positive attitudes to learning, their high attendance, their well-above-average attainment on leaving the academy, and extremely high rates of progression to employment, education or training on leaving the main school or the sixth form.

The previous inspection report identified that leaders needed to improve the consistency of teaching through the sharing of best practice and ensuring that pupils were fully engaged in their lessons, particularly in your large teaching spaces. The well-established culture of continuous staff development underpins the academy's drive for further improvement. Teachers benefit from extensive training to help them to meet the academy's improvement priorities and receive good support to develop their individual skills. You empower teachers to contribute to the innovation of new approaches and pedagogy through action research and collaborative networks. This training has tackled directly the areas for improvement from the previous inspection. For example, a wide range of strategies to develop pupils' literacy skills were observed by inspectors. Pupils' oracy skills were encouraged well through questioning techniques, teachers in mathematics set out clearly the key vocabulary that pupils would need to use in their lessons, and pupils' punctuation and grammar are improving as teachers help them to correct any errors through their feedback. A range of strategies too were used successfully by teachers in order that pupils participated fully in their learning and this was also evident in your 'learning bases'.

Your staff, pupils and parents testify to the academy's high standards and the success of the academy's work. Teachers and parents say that you and your leadership team manage the academy well and they recognise the improvements that you have made.

Governors are highly skilled and committed to the academy. They possess a breadth of expertise that enables them to have a thorough understanding of the academy's performance, hold leaders to account, and fulfil their strategic duties effectively. The work of the academy sponsors makes an important contribution to the academy's ongoing improvements. They too share the high expectations that you have of the academy's performance. They have been instrumental in ensuring that the governing body is composed of the right people and skills-set to oversee the academy's work. Links with other academies within the group of sponsored schools contribute powerfully to the academy's culture of continuous development through the sharing of best practice and the training and support offered to leaders and teachers at the academy.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your leadership team have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose; records are detailed and of high quality. Staff at the academy have undertaken the relevant training and are conversant with the most up-to-date guidance issued by the government. As a result, they are vigilant of the range of risks that pupils at the academy may face. A range of mechanisms ensure that pupils have a secure understanding of how to stay safe online, the dangers of gangs and illegal substances, and the risks of extremism. Pupils also value the wide range of support that they can access from their teachers, support staff and peers. As a consequence, pupils say that they feel safe at the academy and parents are confident that the academy keeps their children safe.

Inspection findings

- Pupils enter the academy with standards of attainment that are above average. On leaving the academy, pupils attain standards in their GCSE or vocational qualifications that are significantly above average. This is because pupils make good progress during their time at the academy. The high proportion of pupils who secure the English Baccalaureate further reflects the successful impact of the academy's curriculum. During the last three years, the progress pupils have made in English, mathematics, languages, humanities and science by the time they leave in Year 11 has improved and in 2015 was broadly in line with expectations. However, not enough pupils have made more than expected progress in English and mathematics. Leaders are rigorously checking the progress made by current pupils to ensure that this will no longer be the case. Performance information about the achievements of current pupils demonstrates that the rising trend in pupils' outcomes is expected to continue to improve.
- Disadvantaged pupils made slower progress than their classmates in English and mathematics in the last academic year. As a result, the gaps between their attainment and that of their peers widened. Leaders at all levels are carefully monitoring the progress of disadvantaged pupils and have ensured that a well-coordinated set of strategies has been implemented in order to boost pupils' achievement, including in English and mathematics. Additional funding is deployed carefully, but the impact of specific strategies needs to be evaluated more sharply so that leaders and governors know which strategies work best. Disadvantaged pupils currently in the academy are making better progress and are catching up with their peers.
- The progress made by boys in the academy has lagged behind that of girls, particularly in English. Leaders are acutely aware of this issue. A broad range of pedagogical approaches and initiatives have been implemented to ensure that boys participate fully in their learning and have high aspirations. Although boys continue to make slower progress than girls, these strategies are successfully accelerating their progress across a range of subjects.
- Subject leaders understand their roles and responsibilities well. Their participation in leadership development programmes has helped them to acquire the skills they need to perform their duties effectively. These leaders understand which aspects of their subjects need to be improved further and instigate a range of measures to drive positive change. They check the work of their teams regularly and support improvements to the quality of teaching in their areas. Some leaders are not able to articulate clearly enough the impact of their work.

- Across the academy, good teaching ensures that pupils learn well and make good progress. Teachers understand the needs of their pupils and are skilled in planning activities that capture pupils' interests and engage pupils in their learning. For example, in an English lesson, pupils were highly motivated when revising poetry in preparation for their examinations because the teacher had planned activities that made sure that all pupils contributed their ideas and thoughts about the texts that they had covered. The use of the large, open teaching spaces in the academy, known as 'learning bases', is effective. Teachers benefit from opportunities to plan collaboratively with their colleagues and adapt their teaching well in order to provide the right level of challenge and support for smaller groups. Sometimes, pupils' learning is slowed when pupils spend too long covering work that they can already do and they are not moved on to more demanding tasks quickly enough.
- The academy's commitment to the professional development of teachers and leaders at all levels is a considerable strength of the academy's work. Leaders and teachers access a broad range of training and support to help them in the continuous improvement of their skills, expertise and practice. Teachers, including those who are at the start of their careers, told inspectors how much they valued the opportunities they are afforded and articulated well how this work has enhanced their practice. Leaders encourage the innovation of new pedagogy in order that teachers can better meet the needs of pupils, and they have been at the forefront of a number of new initiatives. This work makes a significant contribution to the good quality of teaching, leadership and, as a consequence, the academy's capacity to deliver sustained improvements.
- Learners in the sixth form attain standards that are above the national average. Although published information demonstrates a dip in the progress learners made in academic subjects last year, leaders' analysis of learners' performance demonstrates that standards have remained high overall. Learners benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs, aspirations and interests. This is reflected in the high numbers of learners who complete their studies in the sixth form. Those who do not, take up high-quality training or employment opportunities that often evolve from work-experience placements facilitated by the director of careers. Learners develop a good range of employability and personal skills through non-qualification study. The impact of this and of effective careers education, information, advice and guidance is reflected well in learners' above-average progression rates to higher education, including to a range of Russell Group universities. An increasing proportion of learners who have not secured a grade C in English and mathematics are successful in improving their performance.
- Pupils have very positive attitudes to learning. Pupils are keen to learn and aspire to do well. They are able to reflect thoughtfully on their learning and progress because they understand how well they are progressing in learning and know what they need to do to improve. Around the academy site, pupils behave responsibility and with maturity. These positive attitudes are further reflected in the high rates of pupils' attendance, across all groups, and low rates of exclusion. Parents and staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaires have very positive perceptions of pupils' conduct and behaviour.

- The personal development of pupils is fostered extremely effectively through an outstanding range of opportunities that feature as an integral part of the curriculum during 'session 3'. There is a rich focus on ensuring that pupils develop a range of employability skills and pupils contribute to a range of local and international causes. This work successfully supports the academy's promotion of modern British values and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding. The achievements of pupils are celebrated and communicated through multimedia platforms such as the academy's newsletter and 'broadcasts'. Parents who responded to Ofsted's Parent View survey commented on how their children's confidence and aspirations had grown during their time in the academy. In addition, pupils felt that the academy's pastoral structure, where pupils are organised into mixed-age tutor groups, helped to promote a strong sense of community.
- The academy is held in high regard by its stakeholders, including parents, pupils and staff. Many parents value the regular reports they get on their child's progress, which are enabled by the close checks that leaders keep on pupils' progress in the academy. A very large majority of parents would recommend the academy to other parents. Pupils value the support and encouragement of their teachers, who they say help them to do their best and challenge them to achieve well. Pupils enjoy coming to school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- strategies to improve the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and boys are monitored and evaluated rigorously to ensure that they achieve the desired impact
- pupils are moved on to more demanding work when they are ready in order that an even greater proportion of pupils make better than expected progress in English and mathematics from their starting points.

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 Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Chapman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you and members of your senior leadership team. Inspectors spoke to pupils during the inspection in lessons and during the school day, and met formally with a group of pupils. Additional meetings were held with governors, including a telephone conversation with the Chair of the Governing Body, and subject leaders. Inspectors observed pupils' learning in lessons with leaders and looked at pupils' work. Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection. Additional documentation was analysed, including reports to governors, the academy's self-evaluation and improvement plans, records of the progress and attainment of current pupils in the academy, and information about pupils' attendance, behaviour and welfare. Inspectors also considered 43 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, 80 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 91 responses to the pupil questionnaire.