

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)



26 July 2016

Ms Jo Yates  
Headteacher  
The Walnuts School  
Admiral Drive  
Hazeley  
Milton Keynes  
Buckinghamshire  
MK8 0PU

Dear Ms Yates

### **Short inspection of The Walnuts School**

Following my visit to the school on 6 July 2016 with John Bosley, 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 June 2012.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have worked effectively with leaders and staff to create an environment where pupils with a wide range of needs flourish. Pupils make good progress towards challenging but realistic targets and also develop their personal, social and communication skills. You have high expectations of how well staff know, and respond to, each pupil's individual needs. You and your staff tirelessly pursue how best to do this. Of particular note is how skilfully pupils' behaviour is managed in the school.

Since becoming headteacher in September 2015, you have further refined and developed agreed approaches. For example, you have worked closely with therapists to implement effective strategies to support pupils in understanding their emotions. These new successful approaches are employed consistently across all departments and link well to the highly effective strategies you have to manage pupils' behaviour. In particular, each pupil has a detailed and well-thought-out bespoke behaviour, stress, and well-being plan. These plans are used well by teachers and assistants and ensure that pupils' behavioural needs are fully met. As a consequence, pupils are able to participate positively in learning activities. Although some pupils sometimes display behaviours that require careful management, the atmosphere in the school is calm and orderly. One parent commented, 'The Walnut School has changed our lives. We have confidence that

our child is cared for and safe at all times at school.'

The school is growing and evolving. As a consequence, it now operates across three sites. You and your leaders acknowledge that this brings additional communication challenges for leaders and staff, which you are endeavouring to meet. Nevertheless, across the three sites, there is a high degree of consistency in how well pupils' and students' academic and emotional needs are catered for. This includes effective provision for those whose needs are such that they require a sensory curriculum. For example, individual timetables, with activities indicated by a series of symbols, ensure that pupils with high needs are clear about the structure of their day.

You make good use of the school's links with other special and mainstream schools to ensure that the curriculum works well for each pupil. For instance, you have significantly increased the number of accredited courses you offer to pupils and students. The department leaders carefully monitor the impact of the curriculum by checking pupils' individual learning records, by regularly visiting classes to observe learning and by analysing information on pupils' progress. Pupils make good progress towards their challenging targets, become increasingly confident and gain new skills. You have not yet implemented your new approach to assessing pupils' learning without levels. You have strong plans in place to do so next term.

The governing body make a very strong and effective contribution to your school, including supporting your successful work to engage parents. Governors have extensive relevant expertise that they bring to bear on their roles. Governors challenge leaders to make necessary improvements. They make good use of the information they receive on pupils' progress as well as their visits to the school in order to ensure their requests are well-focused. Governors with relevant expertise provide additional support to leaders in their efforts to manage pupils' behaviour so it is as good as it can be.

You and your leaders have systemically developed the areas for improvement from the previous inspection report. The 16 to 19 study programmes have been extended. The provision is now a much better stepping stone for pupils as they move into the adult world. This has been the focus of governors' ongoing scrutiny. Following initial improvements in 2014, including expansion onto a new site, governors challenged leaders to develop their work in this area further. There are well-focused plans in place to ensure that this provision continues to evolve, so the changing needs of students are fully met. In addition, following recommendations from your previous inspection report, the school's approach towards target-setting is now both rigorous and realistic. Leaders carefully monitor pupils' progress towards carefully decided targets. Pupils' targets are set based on the top 25% of pupils with similar starting points nationally and then checked to ensure they are appropriate. The designated leader keeps a close eye on each pupil's progress and also collates information to gain an effective overview. The small steps that pupils make in their learning, which are carefully recorded by teachers and assistants, feed effectively into the whole-school progress tracking system.

## **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements, including risk assessments, are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. In particular, leaders' and governors' checks on staff employment records are rigorous, well-recorded and helpfully collated. They include records of checks made into any gaps staff have in their employment history. There is a team of designated safeguarding leads, with one based on each site to ensure the three different sites are fully covered. They are overseen by the deputy headteacher who effectively collates all safeguarding concerns along with follow-up actions. Leaders check this overview regularly to ensure that actions taken have a beneficial impact and to see if any further actions are necessary. Designated safeguarding leaders have very close and effective working relationships with the local authority's welfare officers, (known as 'children with disabilities team social workers') whom they contact regularly. In addition, you have received training that enables you to train the staff on safeguarding. As a result, staff safeguarding training is appropriately focused on the risks and safeguarding concerns that are most relevant to the needs of the pupils.

## **Inspection findings**

- You, your leaders, and governors have successfully developed the school so that it caters well for pupils' increasingly wide range of needs, including some higher level needs. You have ensured that teachers and assistants have the skills necessary to work effectively with all pupils. You have ensured that those pupils who require a more sensory-based curriculum have their needs fully met. As a result, pupils and students progress well, developing academically and physically as well as socially and emotionally.
- You and your leaders are outward looking. As a result, your school has successfully adapted and evolved. In so doing you have built close and effective partnerships with other mainstream and special schools. These are of benefit to pupils and staff. For example, some pupils attend local mainstream schools to develop their social skills, and others do so to access courses.
- Leaders have effectively involved parents in their youngsters' education. Staff have assisted parents so they can employ some of the successful approaches used to support pupils when they are at school. Parents commented to inspectors that they appreciate the additional parenting courses and events the school provides. For example, an ex-pupil who had been in the sixth form came to talk to parents and pupils about 'life after Walnuts'.
- Leaders have worked very effectively with all staff, especially therapists, to ensure that the new approach to supporting pupils in their emotional and social development (SCERTS) is consistently used. Leaders and therapists have collaborated well in rolling out this new method across the school and ensuring staff are well-trained. Of note, is the way the method focuses on pupils identifying the range of feelings they have and then choosing the best strategy to employ to manage them well.

- You and your staff manage pupils' behaviour expertly. You have developed highly effective individual behaviour plans which provide staff with detailed guidance. These plans link carefully with new approaches to helping pupils to identify and recognise and manage their feelings. On occasions when pupils display challenging behaviour, including when restraint is used, it is followed up by your rigorous and extensive review process. In particular, the behaviour and stress management team (made up of senior leaders along with teachers and governors with relevant expertise) is convened to identify and share learning points. These give rise to new, more effective, approaches that are added to individual plans.
- You and your leaders have successfully improved provision, including the 16 to 19 provision. Pupils and students access appropriate study programmes, including vocational learning and a broad range of accredited courses. Pupils and students who have higher needs participate in carefully thought-out activities. Of note is the way snack time is used as an opportunity for all pupils, especially those with higher needs, to develop essential skills such as the ability to make and communicate choices. One parent commented, 'Our son is happy and has learned to read, write, have a conversation, and most importantly eat food.'
- The designated leader of 16 to 19 provision rigorously monitors the impact of improvements on students' progress, development and well-being. Each pupil has an individualised learning plan, which ensures that they are given the bespoke training needed to transition into the adult world. This includes visits to local colleges. Students who are not able to access courses at local colleges when they leave access education opportunities, delivered by a non-profit making company set up by the school. Some receive further training at local colleges. However, the designated leader is not based at the site, which brings some additional communication challenges. Some staff mentioned these challenges in the staff survey.
- There is a sensible focus on ensuring that students have the life skills they need to be successful in the future. Good use is made of the local community to provide opportunities for students to develop their awareness of how to interact with others and stay safe. Older pupils make regular visits to the local café to practise a number of skills in real-life situations.
- Governors are a real asset to the school. They make well-focused visits to see the school at work, meet with leaders and check the quality of pupils' learning. They also monitor how well behaviour is managed, including the use of restraints. As a result, governors helpfully requested the school to further improve the range of qualifications available as part of 16 to 19 study programmes.
- You have introduced new ways of teaching phonics (the sounds that letters make). This has had a positive impact on helping pupils to read and make progress in reading. Last year one pupil reached the expected standard in the government's phonics check.
- Leaders and governors ensure that pupils have rich and well-planned opportunities for acquiring new skills and experiences, including through work experience, art and music. Targeted pupils have recently started to access alternative therapies, such as pet therapy. These successfully

complement pupils' learning in class because alternative therapists are knowledgeable about the school's agreed approaches.

- Risk assessments are particularly effective because they are bespoke for each pupil but nevertheless detailed. In addition, risk assessments carried out on the school's sites take into account the nature of pupils' and students' needs and the opportunities provided by the site's location.
- There have been improvements in the way teachers and assistants plan learning to ensure that pupils make progress. The school has carefully researched the best method of assessing pupils' learning without levels. Leaders have not, therefore, yet introduced alternatives to national curriculum levels, which are now no longer used.
- There are detailed plans to introduce a new approach to assessment at the start of next academic year. Leaders are aware that occasionally teachers miss opportunities to deepen most-able pupils' skills and understanding through setting follow-on tasks and asking additional questions. Leaders anticipate that this will improve following the introduction of the new approach to assessment.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- plans to introduce a new approach to assessment are fully implemented and their effectiveness closely monitored
- they continue to improve the way they share information across the three sites so that consistency is maintained.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Milton Keynes. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

Inspectors met with you, the deputy headteacher, senior and middle leaders, therapists, a group of pupils, members of the governing body (including the chair), a group of pupils and separately a group of post-16 students, some parents at the start of the day and a representative from the local authority. Short visits were made to a number of lessons, most of which were accompanied by a member of the senior leadership team, to observe teaching and look at pupils' learning journals. Inspectors also observed pupils' behaviour in a range of situations, including in

lessons, around school and at breaktime. The 15 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) and 13 comments that parents made on free text were also considered. Inspectors also considered responses to the staff questionnaire and analysed a range of documentation, including, the school's self-evaluation, the latest improvement plan, information about pupils' progress, and safeguarding documentation.