

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



3 November 2017

Mrs Liz Dakin
Headteacher
The Thomas Adams School
Lowe Hill
Wem
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY4 5UB

Dear Mrs Dakin

Short inspection of The Thomas Adams School, Wem

Following my visit to the school on 17 October 2017 with Lois Kelly, 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 January 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Above-average attainment has been sustained across the majority of subjects at key stage 4, and rates of progress are good for most pupils. Pupils are proud of their school. The overwhelming majority of those spoken to, including those who responded to the pupil survey, are supportive of their teachers, appreciating the help and guidance they receive. You told me how proud you were of the enriching extra-curricular offer that you feel contributes to a more rounded education, and your pupils appreciate these opportunities. Many speak positively about the range of activities available to them, including fundraising for charity. In particular, they mentioned the triannual 'stay awake', sport – specifically badminton – and the arts, where many are looking forward to watching or taking part in this year's musical production.

Since your appointment as headteacher, you and your governors have shown strong leadership in dealing with the challenging financial pressures that you inherited. While this has not detracted from your main responsibilities, you accept that there are still a number of improvements to be made at the school. You have specialist leaders of education based at the school who help lead your school improvement strategy. Their work in other schools offers valuable professional development and brings back good practice seen elsewhere. You are outward facing. As an active member of a local teaching school alliance, you have participated in school-to-school support, both as a giver and a receiver of support.

You engage with external partners to quality assure the work of the school, recent examples being the local authority's review of your sixth form and an external review of your pupil premium strategy.

Parents are complimentary about the school. They value the support that their children receive from teachers. One parent said:

Our children receive an excellent education at Thomas Adams in the lower school and sixth form. Teachers' subject knowledge is outstanding. They also have high expectations of our children and provide ample opportunity to stretch and challenge them.

Inspectors in their last report noted that the school should make improvements by ensuring greater consistency in the quality of teaching. You have targeted an approach that you call 'mark, plan, teach'. This has brought about improvements in the quality of teaching through a specific focus on strategies such as higher order questioning, raising the level of challenge, improving the pace of learning and the use of teaching assistants in the classroom. While some of these strategies are still being embedded across the school, particularly with new staff, you were keen to impress upon the inspection team the investment in training and professional development that you offer. The vast majority of staff who responded to the staff survey value the development they are given and the support they receive.

Safeguarding is effective.

All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Leaders, including governors, take their responsibilities seriously. The school works with a range of other agencies when necessary and referral processes are robust and secure. School leaders are active partners in recently formed locality meetings working alongside two other local secondary schools and a range of other professionals, including police and health, in sharing best practice and disseminating relevant and current information. This serves to ensure that all pupils are safe. All staff receive training across a range of areas including the 'Prevent' duty and female genital mutilation. Staff receive regular updates around safeguarding.

Pupils are taught about how to keep themselves safe from a variety of risks. Personal, social, health and economic education lessons cover a range of issues including resilience, relationships, sex education, drugs awareness and online safety. Assemblies are used to support this using visiting speakers. Pupils feel safe in school. The majority of pupils agree that if bullying happens, it is reported and dealt with robustly. However, responses to the Ofsted parents' survey shows that a few parents are concerned about how effectively leaders tackle bullying.

Inspection findings

- Senior leaders and governors know the school well. They are aware of its strengths and of those areas that need to improve further. Governors provide effective challenge to leaders. They scrutinise information about teaching and ask leaders searching questions.

- Examination results in 2017 show that progress for all pupils is broadly in line with national averages. Attainment is above national comparisons in English and mathematics. Pupils make the best progress in mathematics, where pupils made almost a quarter of a grade more progress when compared with their peers. Pupils make less progress than their peers in English.
- School leaders have adapted schemes of work in English to tackle the skills gap that is leading to slower progress for middle and higher prior-attaining pupils. There is evidence of impact, particularly in Year 10 and below, which school leaders believe will lead to improved outcomes in the future. This is supported in lessons that were seen during the inspection. Pupils are also benefiting in English from a consistent approach to the department's assessment policy, with targeted feedback that pupils say is helping them make better progress.
- School leaders are using exam analysis and other quality assurance activity effectively in targeting areas for development, particularly around the pupil premium, sixth form and school/departmental development plans. However, plans do not include measurable time-bound targets and, for the most part, are actions rather than outcomes led.
- At key stage 5, progress in 2017 for academic courses remains below the national average. There was, however, good performance in English language, French, fine art and biology. School leaders are confident that this will be sustained and demonstrated determination and capacity to improve further.
- Following a review of the sixth form by the local authority, school leaders have been implementing recommendations from the report aimed at bringing about improved outcomes. A new data-tracking system is being introduced to allow more timely interventions, and leadership of the sixth form has been restructured to allow greater focus on sixth form issues.
- The entry criteria for the sixth form have recently been amended to ensure that students are on appropriate courses. In addition, all students have access to mentoring from the sixth form team, in addition to impartial careers advice and guidance. This means that school leaders are more confident that students are on courses suited to their abilities and interests.
- School leaders and pastoral teams know their pupils well. This is a caring school. Personalised support is available for those most in need, and leaders are tenacious in their actions.
- Monitoring of absence for individual pupils is effective. The school operates a first-day call system. Pastoral teams work closely with families and outside agencies to ensure that support, care and guidance are available when needed. The monitoring of groups of pupils could, however, be sharper. This will allow the school to spot trends and patterns earlier, bringing about more rapid improvement for vulnerable groups including disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Last year, the mathematics department employed a successful strategy in using sixth-form mentors to support disadvantaged pupils who had fallen behind. The results saw the overwhelming majority reach their target grade. There are other examples across the school where disadvantaged pupils are receiving effective

support. However, the pupil premium strategy does not prioritise the effective practice that is taking place. Also, without measurable milestones, it does not allow school leaders, including governors, to evaluate the impact of their actions effectively.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- development plans set clear, measurable milestones that allow leaders at all levels to check carefully and regularly the impact that their actions are having on pupils' outcomes and on attendance for vulnerable groups
- the pace of progress is more rapid for disadvantaged pupils, and for students in the sixth form, by ensuring that new strategies are more quickly embedded
- new tracking systems, recently implemented by school leaders, support teachers' planning effectively, allowing timely, personalised interventions so that no pupil gets left behind.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Gill
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, senior and middle leaders, and other staff. I spoke with two governors and a representative from the local authority. We scrutinised a range of documents, including safeguarding policies, data analysis and development plans. Inspectors visited, alongside school leaders, lessons to observe teaching and learning across a range of subjects and to look at pupils' work. We met with pupils formally, as well as holding informal discussions with them. We considered 130 responses to Parent View, 110 free text responses, 70 staff responses and 139 pupil responses to Ofsted's survey.