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Mrs Lisa Ayling
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ayling

Short inspection of Prenton High School for Girls

Following my visit to the school on 29 November 2017 with John Leigh, 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, along with your skilled and enthusiastic deputy, have been very successful in sustaining a purposeful, well-ordered and pleasant learning environment. Staff and pupils feel that you value and encourage them. They are not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them. While insisting on consistently high standards of behaviour, attitude and appearance, you and your senior leaders have led by example to ensure that relationships among pupils, as well as between pupils and staff, are highly positive.

Parents and pupils are very loyal to the school and proud to be a part of it; 98% of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire said that they would recommend the school to another parent. One comment typifies the views they expressed: 'The school is very well organised, fair and responsive to the needs of pupils.'

You and the governing body have maintained the loyalty of staff despite having had to make difficult decisions in order to achieve a balanced budget. Staff I spoke to during the inspection and those who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire feel that you and your senior leaders support them well. They welcome the encouragement you give them to develop as professionals.

Since the last inspection, in 2014, the membership of the governing body has changed substantially. Current governors bring to their role high-level skills in

management, business, finance, human resources and education. These skills enable them to be detailed and forthright in questioning you about standards and quality in the school. The role of link governor to subjects and aspects such as the pupil premium funding enable them to know the school very well. They have high expectations of the girls. Staff expressed their appreciation of governors' regular and encouraging presence in the school.

You and your leadership team regularly review pupils' progress and the quality of teaching to reflect on how well policies are working. Taking into account external reviews, you have been very honest in your self-evaluation and are well aware of what you have achieved and what you still need to do. You are not afraid to adapt if your actions do not have the intended outcome.

In the previous inspection report, inspectors asked you to:

- improve consistency in the quality of teaching so more students, including the most able, make rapid progress, particularly in science
- improve consistency in the quality of leadership so all leaders promote high-quality learning in their subjects.

Since the previous inspection, you have made changes in the leadership and staffing of the science department. However, in the GCSE examinations of 2017, the girls still did not reach their potential in science, especially in physics. You attribute this to past weaknesses which the current department could not fully address in the time available to last year's Year 11. During this inspection, visits to science lessons and scrutiny of pupils' work indicated that girls currently in the school are making better progress. This is a result of improved teaching, a more appropriate curriculum and examination-entry policy, and better leadership. Examination results and your own assessment information show that attainment, particularly in physics, is rising year on year. Despite this, we agreed that you still need to do more to ensure that pupils' progress in physics continues to improve.

In some subjects, such as art, performing arts, catering, graphics and statistics, the most able pupils make good progress and achieve the higher GCSE grades of which they are capable. However, in other subjects, including the three separate sciences, core science and mathematics, higher-ability girls still do not reach their full potential. We agreed that this should remain an area of focus for the school.

You have placed considerable importance on the development of subject leadership. Using an external 'leadership partner', as well as sharing the skills of your own senior leadership team, you have enabled experienced and new subject leaders to play a much bigger part in monitoring quality and standards. School monitoring documents and discussions with middle leaders during the inspection showed clearly that they have a high level of skill and confidence. They have held staff to account and supported those in need of development. The enhanced participation of subject leaders plays an increasing role in improving pupils' progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

Keeping the girls safe from physical and emotional harm is your starting point for all aspects of school life. Governors, staff and pupils understand that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Procedures meet all current requirements and are well documented in clear policies.

You carry out well-organised and regular checks on the suitability of adults in the school to work with children. All staff undertake the required training to ensure that they can recognise if a pupil is in danger. Your staff work very well with external agencies to support children and families who need additional help. They have been tenacious in ensuring that agencies fulfil their obligations.

The pupils whom I and my colleague spoke to said that they feel very safe in the school. They are aware of the dangers presented by the internet and social media and know which staff to contact if they have any concerns.

Systems and processes for ensuring the safety and well-being of the small number of pupils who are educated off-site are very strong. Leaders of off-site institutions spoke very highly of the frequency and quality of communication with your school.

Inspection findings

- In 2017, the overall progress of pupils in the school was similar to that of those pupils across the country who had achieved similar results at the end of Year 6. However, within individual subjects the picture was mixed. Progress in English was significantly above average. Progress in mathematics and science was a little below average.
- I wanted to find out why progress in mathematics was not as strong in 2017 as it has been in the past. Your own analysis shows that some pupils had difficulty adapting to the demands of the new style of examination questions. This was particularly the case where answers required reasoning and problem solving. Another difficulty for pupils was how questions in the new examinations are expressed. After analysing examination results, you quickly put in place strategies to address these difficulties. Our analysis of pupils' work and our visits to classrooms indicate that, although it is not entirely consistent, there is some very strong teaching in mathematics. Teachers are developing pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills well.
- I was interested to know why pupils do particularly well in English. Your own analysis matched what we saw during the inspection when we visited classrooms and looked at work in pupils' books. Very strong leadership of the English department ensures that teaching consistently meets the highest expectations. The girls respond very positively to well-established routines which maximise the time available for learning. Teachers set work which is closely related to the content and style of the new examinations. Pupils spoke very positively about homework booklets made up of tasks which truly extend understanding and move them to the next stage of their learning.

- Another element of the English department's success is the good progress made by disadvantaged pupils, particularly those who are most able. As well as offering one-to-one and small-group support, the English department consistently uses a variety of in-class methods, such as ensuring that disadvantaged pupils have frequent opportunities to explain their thinking in response to teachers' questions.
- However, in other subjects, disadvantaged pupils make less progress when compared to their peers in the school and other pupils nationally. I wanted to know what leaders are doing to address this and whether they have used the funding for disadvantaged pupils to good effect, especially for improving attendance.
- You carefully identified the barriers which disadvantaged pupils face and have used funding appropriately to employ extra staff to support their well-being, attendance and academic progress. In addition, you have ensured that no pupil misses learning experiences, in or outside the school, because of financial difficulty. Although these actions have resulted in some improvement, disadvantaged pupils still do not make enough progress in comparison with their peers because they do not attend school regularly enough.
- Although the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is an area for concern, most pupils in the school rarely miss a day because all staff celebrate good attendance and are tenacious in following up absences and visiting homes. As a result of the staff's hard work and determination, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is improving, but it is still too low and is a barrier to success in examinations.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue working with parents to raise the aspirations of disadvantaged pupils so that they attend school more regularly and achieve their full potential
- they accelerate progress in physics so that pupils' achievements are at least in line with those in chemistry and biology
- they provide opportunities for subject departments to learn from the very strong practice in English so that teaching is consistently effective in challenging all pupils, especially the most able and those who are disadvantaged.

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

Yours sincerely

Liz Kelly
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I had discussions with you, your leadership team and members of the governing body. Jointly with you and members of your senior leadership team, I and my inspector colleague visited classrooms. We spoke to a range of pupils in lessons, in discussion groups and at social times. My colleague listened to pupils read and scrutinised reading records. With three subject leaders, we looked at pupils' work. We analysed the website and a range of documents, including the single central record, records of child protection and staff training, the school's self-evaluation and the improvement plan. We also scrutinised anonymised case studies of pupils currently in the school. We discussed with senior leaders aspects of safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and the use of funding. We spoke to a cross-section of teachers, including middle leaders. We considered 34 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including a number of free-text comments from parents. We also considered 81 responses to Ofsted's online pupils' questionnaire and 50 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.