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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Sally Lees
Principal
Homewood School and Sixth Form Centre
Ashford Road
Tenterden
Kent
TN30 6LT

Dear Mrs Lees

Short inspection of Homewood School and Sixth Form Centre

Following my visit to the school on 23 May 2017 with Jennifer Bray, Ofsted Inspector, and Frederick Valletta, 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 your school was judged to be good in September 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 continued to focus on being inclusive so that all pupils at the school can flourish. A parent wrote, rightly, 'It's a good school that teaches and cares for students with a wide variety of academic abilities and social backgrounds.' Practically all sixth-form students, and the small number of Year 11 pupils not staying into Year 12, leave school with the qualifications they need to match their well-considered future plans. The proportion of pupils and students who move on to education, employment or training is well above that seen nationally.

You and your senior leaders have extended the 'pathways' of subjects offered from Year 9 onwards in response to pupils' abilities and interests. This means the great majority of them enjoy learning and succeed. You have made sure that vulnerable pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities continue to receive the support and care they need to learn well. Having set up a successful 'Life' centre on site, exclusions have dropped this year; pupils receive helpful support and guidance which improve their behaviour and learning.

It is clear from talking to pupils that they often discuss British values, for example in tutor time, and in personal, social and health education (PSHE) lessons. They have certainly appreciated the meaning of democracy related to Brexit and the election taking place soon after the inspection. Pupils and students are also thoughtful and considerate of others and keen fundraisers for charities.

The character of the school is underpinned by the strong provision for pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. In their questionnaire responses, over 90% of pupils agreed that the 'school encourages me to respect people from other backgrounds and to treat everyone equally'. Year 9 pupils listed the different faiths they had learned about in the context of tolerance. The school is calm because most pupils behave well and move around the site sensibly. Pupils and students put into practice the school's motto, 'Learning, Respect and Belonging'. A teacher wrote: 'There is a real team spirit amongst the staff and that spreads to the learners too.'

You have addressed the areas for improvement in the previous inspection report well. You insisted that teachers in all subjects contribute to developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, and they have improved. During the inspection, my colleagues and I saw examples of teachers discussing the meaning and spelling of subject-specific words. We also noted that teachers prepare work at the right level for the different groups in their classes, so that most pupils make good progress.

In recent years, GCSE outcomes have improved but your 2016 headline results were not as strong. For a variety of reasons, 80 pupils, including two thirds of disadvantaged pupils, did not take all the subjects needed to achieve the EBacc qualification which was introduced in 2016. You decided to let some pupils concentrate more on their skills in English. You also stuck to your policy that pupils would not drop work-related courses which they had already started in Year 9. The progress of pupils who did take all of the required subjects was close to that seen nationally. Nevertheless, there were other factors, described in inspection findings below, which contributed to the disappointing outcomes in 2016; governors and senior leaders have identified and tackled these issues energetically.

Safeguarding is effective.

Governors and the senior leadership team make sure that safeguarding arrangements are of a high quality. Staff training is regular and up to date. They are alert to signs of concern and inform safeguarding leaders promptly of any that they notice. All concerns are logged meticulously and the safeguarding leads are astute at identifying where they need to intervene. They are alert, for example, when potentially upsetting comments are posted by girls on social media. The school's PSHE programme covers e-safety on a regular basis, along with first aid and sensitive topics such as extremism, and different relationships and lifestyles.

In September 2016, staff were appointed to support the increasing number of refugees, children looked after and those who are adopted. Leaders do not shy away from contacting social services or other agencies whenever external support is needed to ensure a child's welfare. Pupils who responded to the questionnaire acknowledged that bullying does happen, but the majority of them felt that teachers were good at resolving it. Some parents expressed concerns about behaviour and bullying but nothing untoward was identified by inspectors during the inspection. All staff make pupils' and students' welfare their top priority.

Inspection findings

- You and your senior leaders were not surprised by the key lines of enquiry that inspectors wished to consider during the inspection. They corresponded with the key aspects of the school's work which you have focused on with determination this academic year, the overarching focus being on disappointing outcomes in some subjects in 2016. Together we explored the reasons why particular groups of pupils underachieved, or did not achieve as well as expected in some subjects.
- Attendance is below the national average but improved overall in 2016. However, the attendance of some pupils, including some who are disadvantaged (several of whom also have special educational needs and/or disabilities), was particularly low, which had a negative effect on their progress and the school's outcomes overall. Leaders' determined and effective actions have ensured that attendance has continued to improve this year.
- Since the previous inspection, the difference in progress between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in the school has diminished considerably. In 2016, progress was almost the same in English and closing in mathematics. However, the difference between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally is wider.
- Leaders constantly review most-able pupils' subject choices and progress. The three separate GCSE sciences are increasingly popular and new leaders of science, geography and history have already generated improved progress for all pupils, including the most able. High-attaining Year 7 pupils now study Mandarin as well as French. Other additional sessions provided to support small groups of pupils are now blended into the school day, as many of these pupils have to leave promptly at the end of the day to get home.
- Your intensive work to make sure that pupils' progress is assessed accurately is strengthened by external verification, including that offered by one examination board. High-quality training and the sharing of good practice, combined with some new middle leaders and other teaching staff, are improving this aspect of the school's work. You know, however, that variation exists in the quality of middle leaders' evaluation, assessment and response to pupils' progress.
- You have welcomed regular, critical reviews and taken on board external experts' advice. One noted that your actions this year had been 'robust' and that the new Discovery College (for Years 7 and 8) had led to 'a high proportion of pupils of all abilities making expected progress'. You also appreciate governors' expertise and wisdom and that they ask you challenging questions as well as offering encouragement and support.
- The sixth form continues to flourish, with steady increases in the higher grades at A level and for BTEC National Diploma courses. Students enjoy helping younger pupils and act as good role models for them. The school's curriculum also continues to be innovative, with a new I-College established for pupils who, at times, learn better by studying independently. Many parents praised the school with comments such as: 'There is something for everyone at Homewood' and 'I have never seen my son so happy.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- staff intensify current actions to reduce pupils' absence further
- all middle leaders' analyses of pupils' progress are accurate, so that staff can identify those who are underachieving and help them to catch up quickly
- differences between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and others continue to diminish.

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

Yours sincerely

Clare Gillies
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

My colleagues and I held meetings with you, members of your senior leadership team, several subject and college (faculty) leaders, the special educational needs coordinator and a number of support staff. I met two governors, one of whom was the chair of the governing body and also on the board of the Tenterden Schools Trust.

Inspectors talked to pupils informally around the school and in lessons and held meetings with groups of pupils and students. Between us we visited a range of registration sessions and classes in all key stages, accompanied by a senior leader for most of them. We scrutinised and evaluated documents related to safeguarding, attendance and behaviour, current progress, allocation of additional government funds and leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness and your action plan. We read reviews of the school carried out by external advisers.

Inspectors took into account 104 staff and 271 pupil questionnaire responses and their written comments, 202 comments written by parents and 210 parental responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.