

5 April 2018

Mr Kris Williams
Headteacher
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California Road
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Cumbria
CA3 0BU

Dear Mr Williams

Short inspection of James Rennie School

Following my visit to the school on 20 March 2018 with Cole Andrew, 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 outstanding in May 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your staff provide an excellent learning environment, in which pupils with a wide range of needs flourish and make very strong progress from their low starting points.

Staff warmly welcome pupils to school in the morning, and pupils show from their behaviour and attitudes that they feel safe in school. Leaders take control of the arrangements for dropping off and collecting pupils and ensure that the transport companies follow them. This ensures a very smooth and positive beginning and end to the school day.

Pupils benefit from the encouragement staff give them from an early age to develop their independence with great success. Parents and carers wholeheartedly support the work of the school, with almost all who expressed an opinion making highly positive comments about the quality of education you provide. Typically, parents felt that 'kind and caring staff' look after their children very well.

Since the last inspection, you have successfully addressed the sole area for improvement that inspectors identified at that point. You now work closely with teachers to set more challenging targets for improvement in their work. These are based on the teachers' standards published by the government and include targets that focus on securing rapid progress for pupils. You have in place a more rigorous

assessment system, including more frequent meetings to check on pupils' progress, which informs your evaluation of how well teachers meet their targets.

You hold termly meetings to review teachers' progress towards achieving their targets. You have developed your own grading system that you bring up to date regularly, as part of this process. You provide support to those members of staff who need it, in the form of extra training. You also analyse the information you acquire from your checks on staff performance to identify whether any patterns emerge that show weaker areas of practice across the school. This analysis enables you to provide appropriate training to secure continual improvement. Every year, governors receive an anonymised summary of teachers' annual reviews and make decisions on whether to authorise progression on their pay scale.

You and your senior leaders are uncompromisingly ambitious for your pupils and the quality of education they receive. Your plans are thorough and clearly focused on getting the best for pupils and securing strong progress. You seek constant improvement and have considered how to provide an even better education for your pupils, with exceptional incisiveness. You have, for instance, launched a revised curriculum this academic year. The new curriculum more precisely identifies pupils' needs and abilities and organises pupils into three learning groups accordingly. Evidence from observation of lessons, scrutiny of pupils' work and analysis of the school's assessment information showed that current pupils make very strong progress. The new curriculum contributes significantly to this. You recognise that it is now important to ensure that you firmly establish this curriculum to continue the strong progress we witnessed.

You have also incorporated the practice of 'sensory regulation' to ensure that pupils are in the right frame of mind to learn. Teachers, from early years onwards, ensure that they meet individual pupils' sensory needs by methods such as providing a chew toy as soon as they begin the school day and at intervals throughout the day as required. This is very effective in ensuring that pupils engage well with their lessons.

You are highly analytical in your approach to school improvement. For example, you have introduced a detailed system for recording incidents connected with pupils' behaviour. You regularly check on the number and type of incidents and you promptly provide appropriate support to pupils who are of particular concern. As a result, your management of pupils' behaviour is very effective. We witnessed no serious behavioural concerns. Thorough records show that there have been no incidents of bullying of any kind since the last inspection. We also saw that staff are very skilled in encouraging pupils who have behaviour issues because of their needs quickly to focus on their learning. You also make very effective use of the pupil premium funding to provide one-to-one support for eligible pupils with behaviour needs.

Governors have a very clear overview of the school's effectiveness and are ambitious that the school continues to provide a high quality of education. They have a strong understanding of the information you provide, and their regular visits

to school to observe various activities for themselves further contribute to this. They have a wide range of skills that help them to carry out their duties highly effectively.

You have received external validation of your support for pupils with autism. The National Autistic Society recently presented you with an award in recognition of the school's work with this group of pupils.

The local authority has, understandably, a 'light touch' approach to supporting improvement, as it is confident in leaders' ability to maintain the high standard of education the school provides.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. The school's record of the required checks on members of staff is compliant and thorough. Leaders pursue issues vigorously and make referrals to other agencies when required. There is a suitably secure system on entry to the building to verify the identity of any visitor to the school.

The culture of safeguarding in the school is very strong. All those members of staff who come into contact with pupils are very well trained. They have an excellent understanding of safeguarding procedures and of the various signs of abuse. They also have a profound knowledge of their pupils, which makes them particularly alert to pupils' needs and any changes in behaviour that may give rise to concern. Leaders have also put in place a range of systems, such as cards with pictorial representations of various emotions, to aid pupils with their communication of any concerns. There are no incidents of bullying of any kind.

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed some key lines of enquiry. I have written earlier in this letter about how successfully you have addressed the area for improvement from the last inspection. I have also reported on the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding procedures.
- Another key line of enquiry concerned how well prepared pupils are for life after they have left the school. Inspection evidence shows that pupils are very effectively prepared for the next stage of their development after leaving James Rennie School. Pupils make very strong progress from their starting points, as evidenced by the school's own assessment information, lesson observations and samples of work that inspectors analysed. Leaders moderate assessment information in collaboration with other, similar schools in the local authority to ensure rigour and accuracy. You and your staff develop pupils' independence very effectively. For example, teachers gently insist that children in the early years, who are able to, carry their own belongings, and staff provide opportunities for older pupils to develop the skills to cook for themselves. After-school clubs, such as football and art, develop a range of skills, including social skills, which can be applied in the world outside school. All students who leave

the 16 to 19 provision go on to employment, education or training, attending one of three local colleges. Students choose their destinations based on a combination of their interests and their strengths. College representatives with whom we spoke were very positive about their relationship with the school. They said that the school provides high-quality information to each college about the needs of students. Transition processes are strong and students make meaningful choices of courses and activities to pursue, once they start at their chosen college. Students from James Rennie School always sustain their placement, with none dropping out at any point.

- The next line of enquiry was about attendance. The most recently published information indicated that the rates of absence and persistent absence were considerably above the national averages. Current information shows that there has been a substantial reduction in the rate of general absence. While still above the national average, it is almost half the rate for 2017. The figure for persistent absence has also reduced, but it is still above the national average. Many persistent absences occur because of pupils who have serious medical needs. Leaders, understandably, have difficulty in influencing these circumstances. You have been relentless in developing a range of strategies that have brought about considerable improvement in attendance. These include celebrating high attendance with pupils in school and meeting with parents to discuss the importance of good attendance where appropriate. You recognise the need to persist with your strategies to continue to reduce the rate of absence.
- Finally, I explored whether leaders understand their statutory duties. The evidence clearly shows that they do. The school's website is up to date and complies with statutory requirements. Governors are systematic in holding you and your senior leaders to account. Minutes of meetings confirm that they ask searching questions on a range of issues and provide rigorous challenge.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- firmly embed the school's new curriculum to ensure that they sustain pupils' very strong progress
- persist in their strategies to reduce rates of absence even further.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Quinn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The team inspector and I carried out short visits to the early years and to all key stages, including the 16 to 19 provision. These were joint activities with you and your deputy headteacher. We scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation summary, action plans for school improvement, records of incidents of bullying and misbehaviour, minutes of meetings of the governing body and records connected with the safeguarding of pupils. We held discussions with senior leaders, other members of staff, governors and pupils. We held discussions on the telephone with headteachers of local schools and with post-19 providers. We also spoke with a representative of the local authority. We analysed the school's own assessment information and a sample of pupils' work. We evaluated 20 responses received through Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, and 47 responses to the staff survey. There were no other survey responses.