

The Bicester School

Queen's Avenue, Bicester, Oxfordshire OX26 2NS

Inspection dates

5–6 June 2018

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher has insisted on high standards since his appointment. He has inspired the trust and confidence of leaders, governors and parents with his strongly held view of an excellent education for all.
- Leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Their commitment and focus have led to rapid improvements in teaching, behaviour and progress and a better curriculum.
- Strong teaching, pupils' positive attitudes and high expectations have ensured that current pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, progress well.
- Pupils' behaviour is good. Conduct around the school is calm and orderly. Pupils are well mannered and polite. Relationships between staff and pupils are very positive. Pupils are well cared for.
- Activate Learning Educational Trust (ALET) supports the school effectively. It has ensured that the school has been increasingly successful in recruitment, financial management and in increasing the number of pupils who join the school.
- Fundamental British values are not embedded consistently across the curriculum. Although pupils are respectful and tolerant, some pupils are not fully aware of the importance of democracy in modern Britain.
- Governors have a wide range of experience and they know the school well. They provide high levels of challenge to the headteacher and leaders.
- The sixth form requires improvement. In too many subjects, students do not make as much progress as they should. Leaders have put plans in place to improve students' progress but these have not yet sufficiently improved outcomes.
- Pupils, increasingly, have opportunities to study a range of challenging courses in key stage 4 and in 16–19 study programmes.
- Safeguarding arrangements are strong. Leaders prioritise the safety of pupils and students. This contributes to a vigilant safeguarding culture.
- Teachers' use of the school's assessment and feedback policy is not consistent.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching in the sixth form and ensure that students on 16–19 study programmes make progress that is at least in line with others nationally by:
 - ensuring that assessment is used well to plan students’ next steps in learning and provide high levels of challenge for all students
 - improving students’ attendance
 - continuing to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the sixth form.
- Improve pupils’ progress by embedding the assessment and feedback policy so that it is used consistently.
- Ensure that pupils have more opportunities to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural education and their understanding of fundamental British values.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher has led the school through a turbulent time in recent years. Since the opening of the school as a new sponsor-led academy, leaders have successfully managed acute staffing issues and improved variable teaching. Consequently, teaching now meets the needs of pupils across key stages 3 and 4 and outcomes for current pupils are strong and improving.
- The headteacher has overseen insightful and precise plans for improvement so that the vision of leaders is increasingly well embedded. Leaders have successfully installed a culture of high expectations and a curriculum which aims to give wider opportunities to pupils. In 2015, few pupils had the opportunity to study a GCSE in modern foreign languages. An example of curriculum changes is that current pupils study two languages in key stage 3, and the majority of pupils in Year 10 and Year 11 study a GCSE in a modern foreign language. Many more pupils study triple science than was the case in the past and this gives pupils, and particularly the most able, wider opportunities in science subjects.
- The curriculum is now broad and balanced. Leaders provide appropriately challenging courses for key stage 4 pupils and they have ensured that the school offers courses that complement the courses offered by other local schools so that local children have a range of educational opportunities to choose from. There is a wide educational offer in the local community, including a University Technical College and a Studio School.
- Pupils benefit from a wide range of after-school opportunities. The majority of pupils attend after-school clubs, including activities in sport, art and drama. Pupils have enjoyed the chance to participate in inter-school competitions.
- On the whole, staff recognise and value the improvements that leaders have made. Staff understand the school's improvement aims. Leaders understand that some staff have found it difficult to adapt to increasingly high expectations and increased accountability. As a result, leaders have set up a 'staff welfare group' so that staff are able to discuss and propose solutions to challenges that face them. The majority of staff who responded to the online Ofsted questionnaire felt that leaders are considerate of their well-being.
- Activate Learning Educational Trust (ALET) helps leaders to decide how to improve the school further. The trust has been important in ensuring that the school is in a positive financial position. ALET has also provided support in the recruitment of teachers and in ensuring that more pupils choose to join in Year 7.
- Professional development takes place across ALET schools. This has helped support new members of staff. Some staff, however, told inspectors that training opportunities provided by ALET were not always relevant or useful. ALET leaders are aware of this and are putting strong plans in place to make training more bespoke for staff.
- Leaders' use of pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding is effective. Disadvantaged pupils benefit from a wide range of initiatives so that they are not hampered by a lack of resources. Consequently, disadvantaged pupils make strong progress across all year groups. Specialist members of staff and reading acceleration programmes support Year

7 pupils who need to improve their reading and writing. This means that pupils, who might otherwise have struggled with secondary school work, make increasingly strong progress in key stage 3.

- Leaders prioritise the development of literacy skills, particularly in key stage 3. Pupils' reading and writing skills have improved as a result of the tailored support they have received. Pupils use the school's library regularly and pupils told inspectors that they read more frequently at home due to the encouragement of their teachers and the reading improvement programme.

Governance of the school

- Governors are committed and loyal. They challenge leaders regularly and check that leaders' actions are effective during school visits. Governors provide high levels of challenge to leaders and have ensured financial security.
- Governors manage the school's finances well and have been successful in working with ALET to overcome financial challenges in previous years.
- Governors have a broad spread of expertise. This helps leaders produce effective plans for improvement. With the trust's support, governors have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders have established safeguarding policies and procedures that meet statutory requirements. The arrangements for making sure that staff, governors and volunteers are subject to robust safeguarding checks are exact.
- Training for staff in safeguarding, including training to combat radicalisation, is regular and effective. Staff who join the school during the school year receive immediate training and this adds to the school's vigilant safeguarding culture.
- Leaders have a good understanding of the issues that young people and children face in the local community. Leaders work well with external agencies. As a result, pupils and students know how to deal with safety issues in school and outside of school, including when they are online.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teachers work hard so that pupils learn well. Lessons are well planned and purposeful. Strong relationships between teachers and pupils support this positive atmosphere. One Year 8 pupil told inspectors, 'I just want to emphasise that the staff here are really, really good.' Consequently, pupils' progress is strong because they are challenged by the work that teachers set them.
- Teachers have high expectations that lead to pupils being ambitious. Pupils work hard to meet these high standards. As a result, they learn well and have very positive attitudes to learning.

- Teachers use their precise subject knowledge to structure learning activities which enable pupils to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding over time. Teachers regularly check pupils' understanding and most pupils act on teachers' advice. Leaders are embedding a new assessment policy and most teachers use it so that pupils learn well. However, there are some instances where teachers do not use the school's feedback policy well. In these cases, pupils do not act on useful feedback given by their teachers and this slows learning over time.
- Pupils take pride in their work. They carefully structure their written class work. This enables them to use their own books as effective tools for future revision and learning. For example, in science, pupils structure the evaluations of experiments in a clear way that helps them understand scientific processes. One Year 10 pupil told inspectors, 'Science is hard but we get a lot of support from the teacher.'
- Teachers use questioning effectively to stretch and challenge pupils. Effective questioning often leads to opportunities in lessons for pupils to think deeply about complicated topics. Teachers are increasingly aware of the differing needs of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Consequently, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities learn well.
- Homework helps pupils embed their learning and prepare for future lessons. Pupils value homework. Pupils' attendance, and particularly disadvantaged pupils' attendance, at extra support classes, outside of the normal school day, is high. This support helps pupils catch up or consolidate their learning and it is particularly successful in Year 11 where it leads to pupils feeling better prepared for examinations.
- Parents value the information that leaders share about their children's progress. Regular communication between staff and parents means that parents feel well informed. One parent, who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, wrote, 'Communication between teachers and parents is excellent. I am very impressed with the support and dedication of the staff.'

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils say that they feel safe in school. They know who to go to if they need help or support. This adds to the school's vigilant safeguarding culture. Personal safety issues, such as the dangers of illegal drugs and gang culture, are discussed in assemblies and tutor groups and this means that pupils are aware of how to lead a healthy lifestyle and keep themselves safe outside of school.
- Leadership opportunities for pupils add to their strong personal development. Pupils participate in a school council and there are individual councils for each year group. Pupils are also able to apply to become prefects. Prefects assume a leadership role; for example, they are currently involved in producing a survey for pupils which will investigate the safety issues that are important to them, so that future curriculum changes can reflect pupils' views.

- Bullying is rare and, if it does occur, it is dealt with quickly. One pupil told inspectors that leaders were 'on top of bullying' and that it is not tolerated. This contributes to the safe and respectful atmosphere in and around school.
- Pupils receive impartial careers advice. Pupils feel supported in choosing their GCSE options in Year 9 and in deciding their next steps after Year 11. Pupils across year groups receive careers information through visiting speakers, from local industries and educational institutions.
- Equality of opportunity is an important factor in leaders' plans for careers advice and guidance. For example, girls in key stage 3 and 4 are encouraged to develop their interests in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) so that more girls choose STEM subjects at A level, or are employed in STEM industries in the long term.
- Leaders promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural education within subjects and pupils are respectful and tolerant of all members of the school community. However, fundamental British values are not yet fully embedded. Pupils and students do not have enough opportunities to engage in democratic processes. As a result, they do not fully understand what it means to participate in a democratic society.
- Vulnerable pupils and those who need extra support attend 'The Bridge' because it provides a quieter place for pupils to socialise and receive extra support. Consequently, vulnerable pupils feel well supported.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- There is a respectful and purposeful atmosphere in lessons because of strong relationships between pupils and teachers. Pupils have positive attitudes to their learning. Pupils pay attention in lessons and are able to concentrate hard on their studies.
- Pupils' conduct around the school site is calm and orderly. Pupils are welcoming to visitors and talk about their school with pride. Their good conduct is encouraged by the reward system. Pupils take full advantage of the rewards policy. They are keen to earn house points and this adds to a sense of community within the school's houses. Similarly, poor behaviour can cause house points to be taken away. This deters pupils from misbehaving.
- Attendance is broadly the same as the national average for secondary schools. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is slightly below the attendance of pupils nationally. Leaders are aware of this and are using increasingly effective actions to ensure that all pupils attend school regularly. For example, staff visit pupils who do not attend regularly and have provided transport for pupils who find it difficult to attend for complex reasons.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Current pupils make good progress. Hard-working staff have embedded the new curriculum quickly. As a result, teaching has strengthened and the progress of current

pupils has improved rapidly. Leaders have ensured that plans for school improvement are now having a positive effect on accelerating current pupils' progress, so that it is much stronger, particularly in mathematics and science.

- In subjects such as English, mathematics and science, pupils have responded well to higher teacher expectations and strong teaching, so that they are able to meet and exceed the high standards set for them.
- In key stage 4, current pupils are making strong progress. Pupils are well prepared for new, more challenging examination courses because weaknesses in leadership and teaching have been increasingly resolved. The school's information about these pupils' progress shows that they are making accelerated progress across subjects. Where progress is not as rapid, in languages, for example, leaders have put increasingly effective plans in place to speed it up.
- Disadvantaged pupils' progress is similar to that of other pupils nationally. Teachers and leaders have worked hard to make sure that any differences between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally are diminished through careful tracking of individuals, and extra support for pupils who need to catch up.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities progress well in all year groups. Individually tailored support ensures that these pupils progress as well as others.
- In 2017, Year 11 pupils made progress that was below that made nationally by pupils at similar starting points. A small number of vulnerable pupils performed much less well than expected in 2017. Leaders have accurately analysed the reasons for this underachievement and have been resolute in ensuring that they have addressed weaknesses in teaching. Consequently, the progress of current Year 11 pupils is stronger.

16 to 19 study programmes

Requires improvement

- Leaders have a clear understanding of the sixth form's strengths and weaknesses. They recognise that, over time, students' outcomes have been weak. Recent changes, particularly to the quality of leadership, are starting to make a positive difference for current students' outcomes.
- Although leaders have raised expectations in the sixth form, students' outcomes are still below average. Students do not do well enough in a number of subjects, particularly in vocational subjects, because teaching does not challenge students to achieve highly enough. Students' progress over time is too slow, particularly in Year 13. In too many subjects, students' progress is not rapid enough. Consequently, they do not achieve as well as other students nationally with similar starting points.
- The quality of teaching in the sixth form is variable. Where teaching is most effective, teachers' careful planning inspires students to think deeply, leading to high levels of engagement and strong progress. For example, in English, teaching ensures that students demonstrate considerable knowledge of texts they study and make increasingly strong progress. However, in some subjects, teaching does not provide enough challenge for students. This means that progress is not rapid enough to ensure that students fully understand complex subject content.

- Leaders work increasingly effectively to improve academic achievement by raising teachers' and students' expectations and by setting ambitious targets. Leaders are starting to monitor the quality of teaching and of assessment more thoroughly. This year, improved monitoring has enabled leaders to intervene more swiftly to support students in danger of falling behind. Leaders agree that closer monitoring needs to be more rigorous if it is to be effective.
- Relationships between staff and students are strong. This underpins an improving learning culture in the sixth form. Students are attentive in lessons and are increasingly able to discuss complex subjects and principles.
- Fewer students need to retake GCSE English and/or mathematics than in previous years. No students currently need to retake GCSE English and the proportion of students who improve their grades in GCSE mathematics is higher than national levels.
- Students experience a range of beneficial enrichment activities, such as tutoring younger pupils and work experience. Students told inspectors that work experience improves their employability skills and prepares them well for the next stage of their education and future careers. Students are provided with useful opportunities to consider the range of possible next stages open to them. For example, they visit universities and attend apprenticeship roadshows. However, a small number of students are not successful in securing a place in further education, training or employment when they leave Year 13. Leaders are embedding increasingly effective plans to ensure that this figure reduces.
- Attendance is below average and has declined over the past year. Leaders have put rigorous measures in place to address this. However, these measures have not yet resulted in all students attending school regularly.

School details

Unique reference number	142024
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10046622

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary Comprehensive
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	909
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	115
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David Dunne
Headteacher	Tony Rushworth
Telephone number	01869 243331
Website	www.thebicesterschool.org.uk
Email address	enquiries@thebicesterschool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The school joined the Activate Learning Educational Trust in September 2015. The trust has worked with school leaders to provide strategic direction in order to improve the school. The trust delegates aspects of governance to the local governing body. The Board of Trustees is the accountable body for all schools in the Activate Learning Educational Trust.
- The Bicester School is an averaged sized secondary school. The majority of pupils are White British.

- The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged is below the national average for secondary schools.
- A very small number of pupils attend an alternative provider, Meadowbrook College.
- The school meets the government's floor standards.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 41 lessons. In the majority of observations, senior leaders joined inspectors.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, the headteacher, a trust representative and governors.
- Inspectors formally met with groups of pupils from key stages 3, 4 and 5 and their views from surveys were taken into account. Inspectors also spoke to a wide range of pupils during social times and during lessons.
- Inspectors looked at samples of pupils' work and observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school.
- Inspectors considered the views of staff from meetings with groups of staff and from the 46 staff who responded to the confidential questionnaire.
- Inspectors took into account the views of 96 parents who responded to the confidential Ofsted parental questionnaire, including 95 free-text responses.
- Documentation was scrutinised by inspectors including the school's plans for improvement, its self-evaluation, reports on attendance and behaviour, records relating to pupils' safety, minutes of governor meetings, and information on pupils' outcomes.

Inspection team

Harry Ingham, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
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Peter Rodin	Ofsted Inspector
Catherine Old	Her Majesty's Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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