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Mrs Corina Foster
Headteacher
The Valley School
Valley Way
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Dear Mrs Foster

Short inspection of The Valley School

Following my visit to the school on 24 January 2018 with Fyfe Johnston, 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 October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You lead the school with passion, resilience and an unswerving vision to improve the lives of all your pupils. This is a school where everyone plays their part in supporting the pupils as they learn to believe in themselves. 'To see real transformation in our pupils' is at the heart of the school's approach. Your determination and relentless pursuit of improvement have earned the admiration and the confidence of the community.

Pupils are very proud of their school. They speak positively about their relationships with members of staff and each other. For example, one pupil spoke vividly about the staff when he described them as 'always being there for you every minute of the day, no matter what'. Pupils' conduct around the school is exemplary. They are courteous young people who happily welcome visitors and take good care of their environment.

Parents also value the school's work. They say how delighted they are that their children attend the school and the vast majority would recommend it to other parents. One parent expressed the views of many, commenting, 'This school and everyone in it is giving my child a future.'

Governors are fully involved in the life of the school. They are knowledgeable, skilled and determined for the school to be the best it can be. They know the school's strengths and weaknesses well. They provide effective challenge and support for you and other leaders. My scrutiny of the minutes of their meetings

demonstrates that they are making effective use of their skills and knowledge to ask pertinent questions relating to the progress that pupils make.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is given a very high priority by leaders, staff and governors. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Systems for signing in are rigorous and the use of photographic identification badges for visitors minimises the possibility of unauthorised people accessing the school site.

Leaders and governors ensure that the single central record is kept up to date and all relevant checks are made when employing new staff. All safeguarding-related policies and procedures are in place and meticulously followed. Staff receive regular training to ensure that they understand the signs that pupils may be at risk, and report and record concerns appropriately. Partnerships with local agencies are well established.

Staff understand pupils' vulnerabilities very well. They know how outings need to be assessed for any risk they may pose. They are vigilant to pupils' needs and their well-being is considered in all aspects of school life.

Inspection findings

- To consider whether the school remains good, I identified key lines of enquiry that we investigated during the day. The first of these was to establish the quality of leadership and governance. This is because you have been appointed as the headteacher since the last inspection and there is also a different chair of governors.
- You have high expectations of yourself, your staff and pupils, which have created a positive environment in which to learn. Leaders and governors are clear about their specific roles and responsibilities. Parental responses made during the inspection strongly agree that the school is well led and managed.
- Changes leaders have made to the curriculum have broadened choice and ensured that pupils are guided onto the courses that are most suitable for them. Regular visits to classrooms provide leaders with a clear overview of the quality of teaching and its impact on pupils' learning.
- However, you agree that there is still work to be done with senior and middle leaders. Not all leaders analyse and evaluate in depth what they do well to inform their planning further. This means that the rate of improvement is not as rapid as it could be.
- My second line of enquiry focused on transition arrangements. This is because you identify in your development plan that you wish to establish effective transition programmes. The school's approach to transition is proactive and thorough at all key stages. Staff work very closely with pupils and their families before they join the school. The bespoke transition programme, which includes a

range of activities, helps pupils and their families to get to know their new school very well.

- You make sure that pupils and their families are well prepared for the move to college. Staff make every effort to ensure that pupils will be successful when they start their new college and any anxieties are kept to a minimum. Leaders ensure that pupils in Year 11 make regular visits to their post-16 destinations to ensure that their transition is seamless.
- My third line of enquiry looked at attendance and the welfare arrangements of your pupils. A number of pupils had low attendance at their previous schools. You have rightly targeted this group and involve the attendance officer where necessary. You have set up robust systems allowing you to follow up absences swiftly. Over time, staff are very successful at raising pupils' attendance and in re-engaging them in learning.
- The welfare of your pupils is at the heart of the school's work. The 'different for different' ethos permeates the school and is implemented in an unassuming, calm manner. Staff work intensively to raise self-esteem and confidence through a highly individualised programme of support that captures pupils' imagination.
- My final focus was on the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. You now make sure that all teachers and learning partners have easy access to information on their pupils' progress to plan future learning. The systems for recording and tracking pupils' achievements are helpful for showing staff how much progress has been made.
- Teachers are thorough in checking that pupils have mastered previous learning. However, you agree that some teachers do not challenge pupils in their learning to achieve the very best outcomes. As a result, pupils, especially the most able, are not consistently achieving their full academic potential.
- Your good understanding of the school's effectiveness and consequent actions are not expressed as well as they could be in your self-evaluation report and improvement plan. You agree that plans for improvement lack precision. This restricts how confident leaders can be that they have kept focused on the most important aspects; and also how effectively improvements can be monitored.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the link is enhanced between self-evaluation and improvement planning
- the development plan is used to monitor regularly and evaluate rigorously the effectiveness of improvements made
- leaders at all levels thoroughly analyse and evaluate their areas of responsibility to drive improvement even further
- teachers consistently plan sufficient challenge into their lessons to raise pupils' progress and attainment even further, notably that of the most able.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools

commissioner and the director of children's services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, your senior leaders, the chair of governors and two other members of the governing body. The lead inspector held a telephone conversation with two representatives from the local authority. We visited classrooms through observations and learning walks. We spoke to a group of pupils and talked to them informally throughout the day. We took account of the free-text messages on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, from parents, as well as staff responses. We spoke to a number of parents, both face to face and on the telephone. We analysed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan, information about pupils' progress, and attendance and behaviour records. The single central record and safeguarding documentation, including risk assessments, were considered.