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28 January 2015

Mr Vic Ashdown
Headteacher
Valley Park School
Huntsman Lane
Maidstone
ME14 5DT

Dear Mr Ashdown

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Valley Park School

Following my visit to your academy on 28 January 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was a monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with the no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out in response to two complaints made to Ofsted which raised serious concerns. The complaints were deemed to be qualifying complaints and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector decided that an unannounced inspection of the school should take place to follow up the whole-school issues that were raised. The inspector sought to establish whether:

- safeguarding procedures are adequate, including the response to students presenting challenging behaviour
- suitable adjustments are made to behaviour management procedures, according to the students' needs and disabilities
- staff are suitably trained and able to seek support and advice when required
- leaders and the governing body are effective in monitoring and evaluating policy and practice for behaviour management and safeguarding within the school.

Evidence

The inspector considered evidence including:

- observations of students' behaviour and their attitudes to learning in lessons
- observations of students' behaviour throughout the day, including formal and informal discussions with pupils

- documentary evidence
- discussions with academy leaders and staff.

Having evaluated all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers have taken effective action to maintain the high standards of behaviour and attitudes identified at the academy's previous inspection.

Context

The school is larger than the average-sized 11–18 school, with around 1200 students on roll. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and who speak English as an additional language is low, at about half the national average. The proportion of disadvantaged students entitled to free school meals is lower than average, at about one in six. The academy has a higher than average proportion of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs. The academy has a small number of long-term supply teachers, following recruitment difficulties in science and modern languages.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Most students arrive at the academy on time and staff are on duty to chivvy along latecomers and to record their lateness when appropriate. Students are well aware of, and accept, consistently applied consequences for being late. Students enter the school in an orderly manner, and their positive relationships with each other and with teachers are evident in their cheerful interactions. Sixth formers set a very good example to younger students in their mature approach and demeanour. Students are proud to look extremely smart and they recognise the consistently high expectations of staff about their uniform. At the end of the day, students leave the academy in a well-ordered manner. Staff are on hand to ensure good behaviour.

At break and lunchtime, students' behaviour is lively and sociable. Supervising staff report typically good levels of behaviour in the canteen where, despite inclement weather and very busy queues, the inspector observed students waiting patiently for their food. No litter was left behind in the canteen, and the academy site is tidy and litter-free. Students have access to all areas of the site, and are trusted to manage their behaviour without intensive levels of supervision. The highly effective student support centre provides help for any students who require it, including those with special educational needs. Although the site has several blocks, corners and pathways, there are no areas where students feel unsafe. Any student placed in the seclusion room is accompanied to the canteen by a member of staff to collect lunch.

Between lessons, most students move purposefully to their next class. However, a few students linger to chat in courtyards and corridors and need to be hurried along by teachers.

In the vast majority of lessons, students' behaviour is very good. Inspiring, engaging teaching and unfailingly high expectations mean that students are keen to learn and to make outstanding progress. Students reflect positively on the calibre of many teachers in the academy, especially those that have supported the progress of less able students. Nevertheless, there are pockets of weaker practice. In these lessons, some students take advantage of temporary staff and do not behave as well as they should. Here, students do not always follow instructions quickly enough, and they chat to each other rather than working hard.

Students treat each other, staff and visitors with respect. There is very little bullying. Students feel very safe in the academy and report that they know exactly where to go if they need help. Nevertheless, a few students commented that, between each other, inappropriate language is sometimes used, and this is not always picked up by the teachers.

The academy has excellent systems for managing behaviour. The central student support centre (SSC) is highly regarded by students. Each year group benefits from a head of year, a non-teaching student support manager and a trained coordinator for provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs. These staff are all based in the SCR, which means that support is always available for students, and that parents can always contact a relevant member of staff. The inspector saw a swift and effective response made to a concern reported by a parent. Senior leaders make sure that all support is driven by a relentless focus on how well students achieve. As a result, those students with special educational needs make exceptional progress.

Senior leaders do not yet analyse well enough information about the proportions of different groups of students who are late, or who attend the seclusion room. Nor do they measure the proportions of different groups that receive rewards. The academy does not yet track any changes to these numbers, which makes it hard to judge how well policies are working for students with special educational needs, for example. Information examined by the inspector showed that students with special educational needs currently make up a disproportionately high percentage of students who are late, although numbers are small.

Teachers are trained to promote excellent behaviour very well. Teachers who joined the academy more recently comment in glowing terms on the high standards of behaviour at Valley Park. They report feeling well supported because staff apply the agreed ways of managing behaviour consistently across the academy. This matches what most students say. Relationships between students and staff are professional and positive, and teachers constantly reinforce and praise good behaviour. Students appreciate the reward certificates and positive telephone calls that follow good attendance and behaviour.

The academy has been working assiduously on updating the special educational needs policy. Led by the expert head of foundation learning, the process is including wide consultation with all members of the community. In the meantime, the

academy has kept parents of disabled students and those with special educational needs well informed of any changes to practice.

The academy's own information shows that the number of fixed-term exclusions fell in 2014 and is continuing to decrease this year. Leaders took the decision to make better use of the 'seclusion room' as an alternative to exclusion. As a result, numbers of students placed in the seclusion room have increased. When they receive this sanction, students are closely supervised and work hard all day, which means that their learning is not disrupted. Several students were able to describe how the academy had supported them to improve their behaviour, and were grateful for this. In addition, these students felt that their parents were supportive of Valley Park.

The academy's procedures for safeguarding meet statutory requirements. All staff are well trained; pastoral leaders are trained to a higher level. The academy makes good use of Kent social services for advice and support, and does not flinch from making referrals to the Local Authority Designated Officer when necessary. Students feel safe and secure. They and their parents are very well informed about safety on the internet as a result of the academy's e-safety education in lessons and parents' information evenings.

Attendance has improved for all groups of students and is now in line with or higher than the national average.

Academy leaders are entirely committed to maintaining the highest standards in all aspects of the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Analyse all data, including that on punctuality, seclusion room referrals and rewards, so that trends and patterns for different groups of students can be identified and can inform even better practice.
- Make sure that all teachers, including temporary staff, maintain the high standards of behaviour management shown by the vast majority.
- Ensure that all teachers are listening out for instances of inappropriate language from students so that it can be tackled robustly.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Kent, the Education Funding Agency and the Secretary of State for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Anwar
Her Majesty's Inspector