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Mr Richard Johnson
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Dear Mr Johnson

Short inspection of Severn Vale School

Following my visit, with Katherine Powell, Her Majesty's Inspector, to the school on Thursday 28 January 2016, 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in January 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

You, your senior leaders and governors have an accurate understanding of the strengths of the school and of what needs to be improved further to ensure that all teaching and learning are at the very high level you expect. Your self-evaluation is detailed, perceptive and accurate. The governing body has a wide breadth of experience and expertise to provide you and other school leaders with a very good balance of excellent support and robust challenge. The school is well placed to continue to improve.

Severn Vale is a very happy school. Pupils are proud of the school. They enjoy their learning and the wide range of other stimulating activities the school provides. We were impressed by the large number of smiling faces in lessons and around the school. You, supported well by other senior leaders, governors, teachers and pupils, have built a very strong culture and ethos that lead to the extremely harmonious school community. The excellent set of core values underpin everything the school does.

Pupils are very polite, courteous and respectful. They live up to the school's STEP (Smile, Thank you, Excuse me and Please) approach and apply it well. They conduct

themselves extremely well in lessons and have good attitudes to their learning. Almost all willingly play a full part in their learning. They behave safely and sensibly around the school site. They mostly move promptly to lessons and arrive on time, ready to learn. In lessons, we saw some excellent examples of pupils supporting each other with their work. The pupils that we spoke to have a very clear understanding of the professional relationships between teachers, other adults and pupils that make schools work effectively. They particularly value the high-quality 'wrap-around care' that ensures that they are very well looked after in school. Teachers know about each pupil, including their personal circumstances, their current levels of achievement and any potential barriers to their learning and attendance. This knowledge is used effectively to support, with great sensitivity, every pupil's personal development and welfare, and their physical, emotional and mental well-being. Parents speak very highly of the school, often quoting the excellent levels of personal support for their children.

We were impressed by pupils' commitment to the list of 30 pledges that they will try to try to tick off over the course of the year. These pledges range from personal development activities, such as visiting a museum or sleeping out under the stars, to more selfless concerns for the welfare of others like helping out with the washing up or volunteering at a community group. This illustrates how well the school's approach to the all-round development of each individual pupil helps to prepare them for life after leaving school.

Within this wider context, you maintain a relentless focus on making sure that all pupils achieve as well as they can. Pupils mostly do achieve well, and some very well, because teaching is almost always at least good and sometimes outstanding. Learning is of a high quality in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics, history, languages and science. You, and your senior and subject leaders, are fully aware that the progress of a small number of pupils, including some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and supported by additional funding through the pupil premium, needs to be better in some subjects. The work you have done to improve teaching, to introduce new assessment arrangements, to make changes to the curriculum and to review how pupils are grouped in lessons is having a significantly beneficial impact in Years 7 to 9. As a result, the achievement of all pupils in these year groups is improving. There is also evidence of improvements in the achievement of older pupils.

There is a very good atmosphere for learning in classrooms. There are good working relationships between teachers and pupils, and between the pupils themselves. Learning proceeds at a brisk pace, often driven by the teacher's skilful use of questioning to involve many pupils in high-quality discussions. Pupils' work is mostly at a good or better level and is consistent with the teacher's evaluation of pupils' current achievement. Teachers' expectations of pupils' behaviour and the quality of their work are generally high. You and your senior leaders are fully aware that the most-able pupils in the class sometimes need to be challenged to produce work of

an even higher quality. While questioning is used extensively, and often well, by all teachers, it can still be improved to involve more pupils and to check and deepen learning even further. Teachers generally give pupils very good feedback on an individual piece of work. However, they do not always give pupils precise enough guidance on how to secure and sustain further improvements in the quality of their work.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and the way they are prepared for life in modern Britain, are strong features of the school. They speak highly of their work in 'futures' lessons. This programme, that covers in-school, local community, national and global issues, is constantly reviewed to keep it relevant and up-to-date. It ensures that pupils have a deep understanding of fundamental British values. They demonstrate a good understanding of the need for respect, tolerance and an understanding of other faiths, beliefs, values and cultures. The lessons also help to develop pupils' wider skills such as speaking and listening, working in teams, and how to support their views with deep thinking and reasoning.

Pupils' attendance has improved but more work is still needed, particularly to improve the attendance of a small group of persistent absentees. Nonetheless, the wide range of hard work you and your colleagues have put in is making a positive difference. There are improvements in attendance across all years and for all groups of pupils so that it is at least in line with the national average, and above for some year groups. The work of the deputy year team leaders, as well as your work with parents and a wide range of external agencies, has been instrumental in securing these improvements. You are fully aware that there is still work to be done with some pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed, complete and of high quality.

The importance of safeguarding permeates the school. You and your leadership team have created a highly effective culture, building on the school's core values, that ensures that the safety of all pupils is paramount. Pupils feel safe, are safe, and know what to do if they have any concerns. Highly efficient procedures, supported well by training for all staff, ensure that swift action is taken when any concerns arise. As a result of effective training, all staff are fully aware of all aspects of safeguarding. They are secure in their understanding of their 'Prevent' duty and how to deal with extremism and prevent radicalisation.

All pupils follow a 'futures' programme that raises their awareness of a variety of issues and prepares them well for life after school. 'Keeping yourself safe', including the importance of online safety, is a key feature of the programme. Lessons and assemblies consistently respond to real issues that could easily happen at Severn

Vale and teachers ensure the importance of 'keeping it real' for the pupils. A recent example explored the dangers of posting an image online and how this could lead to dangers such as internet grooming. Pupils told us that discussing a case from a school similar to theirs really helped their understanding of the dangers.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed to look at three areas where you have been working with teachers to improve the quality of teaching and where there are indications of the impact of this: setting high expectations for all individuals, as well as groups of pupils; the effectiveness of teachers' use of questioning in lessons; and the impact of the feedback to pupils on improving their work and raising their achievement.
- We agreed that you need to make some teaching more securely and consistently good. The work you have been doing, through the new assessment arrangements, is having a marked effect on classes in Years 7 to 9. This includes making sure that teachers establish precisely what pupils can and cannot do at the beginning of new topics and lessons. Teachers then build on this increasingly effectively to challenge pupils, including the most able, to do as well as they can. There is also evidence of improvements in some Year 10 classes.
- In almost all lessons, the expectations of what pupils are expected to learn are clear. Teachers set high standards for pupils' learning, the presentation of their work and their behaviour. These are mostly maintained well, although the highest-achieving pupils in some classes could be encouraged to do even better.
- We agreed that we would look at the achievement of the most-able pupils, particularly those who enter the school in the high-prior-attainment group. Your own analysis of pupils' current levels of achievement show this has improved, although there is still work to be done. In some classes, for example in a mathematics lesson, some of these most-able pupils found the work too easy and all of the work in their books was correct; they were not being challenged to show what they are really capable of achieving.
- Teachers use questioning extensively to drive the pace of learning and develop pupils' thinking. We saw some very high-quality questioning in lessons in a very wide range of subjects. However, not all teachers are equally skilled in using questions to carefully check the learning taking place, to share responses and thereby involve more pupils, while deepening their learning.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils on their work is at least good. The feedback makes clear to pupils what they need to do to improve that piece of work. However, pupils do not always sustain this improvement over time.
- We agreed that we would look at how well pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are doing. Current work in lessons and in pupils' books confirms no difference in the depth of learning or achievement between these pupils and that of others.

- The 2015 examination results showed that achievement in languages and science were not at the high level of other subjects. Our observations of learning in these subjects showed a much improved picture and supported your own information about pupils' current levels of achievement.
- The attendance of pupils in all years and for all groups has improved. This shows the effectiveness of the range of strategies you use. You are fully aware that the attendance of a small group of pupils is still not good enough. You are extremely persistent in tackling this. Your work with parents and a wide range of external agencies is making a positive difference. You recognise the negative impact of poor attendance on the future life chances of these young people and you never give up. This is also reflected in your approach to excluding pupils, which you do with much reluctance. You explore all avenues, including working with the schools that offer alternative provision in the local authority area, to avoid taking this action.
- High-quality careers guidance is very effectively built in to the curriculum from Year 7 to Year 11. A very wide range of activities is used to develop pupils' employability skills. Pupils are given full and impartial advice on all post-16 options and they are very well prepared for their next steps. As a result, all move on to education, employment with training, training or an apprenticeship in a wide range of providers and/or employers. A challenge for your senior leaders is the difficulty they have in tracking these former pupils over any length of time. This inhibits their ability to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of the careers guidance they provide.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should build on the excellent practice in the school and the good work already started to ensure that all teachers:

- establish precisely what all pupils know, understand and can do, and plan their teaching so that all pupils, including the most able in the class, make the progress they are capable of
- use questioning more effectively to involve more pupils, check on learning and deepen pupils' understanding
- ensure that their feedback enables pupils to build on and sustain improvements to their work.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Gloucestershire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

At the start of the inspection we met with you and other senior leaders to review your self-evaluation and other information to determine the lines of enquiry for the inspection.

We then held further meetings with you, your senior leaders, other key members of staff, the Chair and two other members of the Governing Body, and with pupils.

We observed learning, with you and other senior leaders, in a range of subjects and year groups. In these lessons, we looked at pupils' work and talked with them about it. During our tours of the school, we looked at displays of pupils' work. A Year 8 assembly about Holocaust Memorial Day was also observed.

A range of documented evidence was looked at, including information about pupils' current achievement and attendance. We also discussed your latest evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

We undertook activities to ensure that safeguarding arrangements were effective.