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Mr Stephen Neate
Headteacher
Richard Hale School
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Dear Mr Neate

Short inspection of Richard Hale School

Following my visit to the school on 9 February 2016, accompanied by Richard Spencer, Additional 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 December 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Senior leaders' skills complement each other well so that the drive to improve the school has continued to have an impact. The leadership of the school is highly regarded by parents, members of staff and pupils. Your engagement with parents is a particularly positive aspect. This is demonstrated by their rapid response to your request that they complete the Ofsted online questionnaire (Parent View) upon notification of the inspection, which rose from no responses at all to almost 300 by the time inspectors left the school.

Yours is a self-critical institution where you regularly monitor, evaluate and review the quality of the school's provision. You have shifted the emphasis away from pupils' attainment to the progress made by different groups of pupils. This is particularly important as pupils enter this school with prior levels of attainment which are significantly higher than the national average.

You have high expectations of your teachers and they, in turn, have equally high expectations of the pupils they teach. You expect all teachers to plan and deliver good-quality lessons and to make use of the wide range of resources available to them. You ensure that teachers take part in healthy debates about teaching and they are keen to develop good practice so that any subjects which perform less well can improve. You have started to include a wider range of evidence to inform your

judgement on the quality of teaching in the school. However, your current evaluation of the quality of teaching requires some modification in order to become more realistic and to represent the range of evidence you have gathered.

Pupils attain highly in this school. There are a few subjects in which pupils do not achieve enough of the top grades because some teaching does not challenge them sufficiently. This is the case both at GCSE and in the sixth form. You are aware of this and have forged some productive links with similar schools to share good practice.

The school is a friendly and mutually supportive community where morale is high and pupils are well developed as all-round individuals. Your school is founded on strong and traditional values which underpin everything you do. Pupils commented positively on the benefits they see from the house system and the wide range of clubs and activities made available for them. You promote equality of opportunity well and are particularly careful in ensuring that all groups of pupils are treated the same. For example, you monitor participation in extra-curricular activities by different groups of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs or disability.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and the school's governors have ensured that arrangements to keep pupils safe are strong and effective. The culture of safeguarding in this school is one of vigilance. The school's single central register meets statutory requirements and is updated regularly. There are stringent processes in place to ensure that the suitability of applicants is checked thoroughly before an appointment to the school is made.

Vulnerable pupils are very well cared for in your school and their needs are well understood. Records are detailed and thorough; liaison with external agencies is regular and ensures that the needs of pupils are met. All staff have had 'Prevent' training and have acted on this when they have had any concerns. The child protection policy is particularly pertinent to the needs of this specific school.

Inspection findings

- Pupils enter the school with significantly high levels of prior attainment. Leaders have successfully maintained the high levels of attainment as pupils progress through the school and reach the end of Key Stage 4. The proportion of pupils who achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics was well above the national average in 2015.
- Progress made by pupils over time has been good, particularly in mathematics, science and in the humanities subjects. Although pupils' progress dipped in English, design technology and physical education in 2015, you have taken appropriate action to tackle this. Your information on

current pupils' progress and inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' books indicate improved rates of progress in 2016.

- Your school improvement plan identifies the correct priorities for the school and is closely linked to your self-evaluation summary document. The improvement plan would be even better if some of your targets were sharper, more easily measurable and if you identified fixed times during the year to enable the governing body to monitor progress being made.
- Subject leaders are held to account well by their line managers. Their self-evaluation documentation is regularly monitored by senior leaders. Many could point to examples where they have been challenged about the grades they have themselves awarded for their subject's performance.
- Teachers make use of a wide range of teaching styles and resources which meet the needs of different groups of pupils. In the few instances where teaching is weaker, for example where lessons lack challenge, a very small number of pupils can become disengaged with their learning. This is particularly the case in Year 8 and Year 10. The quality of teaching is sometimes variable within the same subject.
- Teachers use a good range of activities to assess pupils' progress. A particularly innovative strategy is used in sixth form geography teaching where teachers upload verbal feedback onto the internet for learners to download and act on.
- The headline figure for pupils' attendance is high. The family support worker has helped to engage some of the more hard-to-reach parents in ensuring their children attend school more regularly. The attendance of some groups does not yet match the high attendance rate set by other pupils. For example, although the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is rising, it could still be improved. Equally, the attendance of the few disadvantaged pupils could be better.
- Pupils know how to keep themselves safe. The school ensures pupils have a very good understanding of e-safety through police visits and information provided to parents. The Samaritans have also been engaged effectively to promote sixth formers' well-being.
- Work-related learning is a strong feature of the school, including in the sixth form. Inspectors observed pupils in Year 9 developing their interview skills. Learners in the sixth form are very well prepared for the next stage of their educational career and many go on to study at prestigious universities.
- Members of the governing body have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaker areas. Governors make a concerted effort to visit the school regularly. For example, they are linked to subject areas which involve meeting with the head of department and observing pupils' learning in lessons. Governors clearly challenge senior leaders. This is evidenced through minutes of meetings where governors ask pertinent questions and ask for additional information if they are not satisfied with the answers they are given.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- school improvement planning is sharper, with more measurable targets and identified times to monitor progress during the school year
- the most-able pupils are challenged more through their teaching so that a greater proportion achieve the top grades at GCSE and in the sixth form
- they draw on the very good teaching practice that already exists in the school so that the variation in the quality of teaching is reduced
- the small amount of low-level disruptive behaviour that exists in Year 8 and Year 10 is eliminated
- the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs or disability is as good as other pupils in the school.

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

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteachers and other senior leaders, heads of department, the head of inclusion and the Chair and other members of the Governing Body. Inspectors met with groups of pupils and spoke with other pupils throughout the day. Inspectors looked at responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. They observed teaching and learning in lessons jointly with you and the deputy headteacher, looked at pupils' books and scrutinised a range of school documents.