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Miss Christine deGraft-Hanson
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Dear Miss deGraft-Hanson

Short inspection of Garston Manor School

Following my visit to the school on 16 March 2017 with Janet Tomkins, 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

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

Soon after taking up post in September 2015, you identified the strengths of the school and where further improvement could be achieved. With the support of governors, you are effectively addressing the key priorities of the school's improvement plan. You have had to take some challenging and, at times, unpopular decisions, but are tenacious and acting in the pupils' best interests. You are setting high expectations for staff and pupils.

The large majority of parents praise the school. They feel that you are approachable and totally dedicated to making the school even better. Comments include:

- The school is well managed.
- I am very impressed with the provision.
- The staff are amazing.
- The headteacher has a clear vision to improve pupils' learning and progress.
- The good curriculum is enriched by a variety of opportunities.

The school's own annual parent surveys reflect these positive comments. The 38

parents who expressed their views through the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, are mostly positive about the school. A further 27 sent additional comments and some of these are less positive.

A few parents are worried about bullying. Some think that they are not told much about their children's progress and that progress is not always rapid enough. Inspectors found that bullying is taken very seriously, investigated fully and not tolerated. Staff are working diligently to identify pupils' needs and to make sure that the work they set helps them learn well. Pupils make good progress, although we found that some pupils could do even better. Communication with some families requires further consolidation, including through the school's website.

At the previous inspection, inspectors recommended that pupils should be taught to apply their learning to real-life situations and that the use of technology to support pupils' learning should be improved. These recommendations have been addressed well. Pupils now have many opportunities to apply their learning, for example through work experience and practical activities. Staff and pupils use information technology well to support their work. The work with the University of Hertfordshire, using robotics to improve communication with pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder, is a good example of innovative practice.

You are keen to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning to improve pupils' academic success. Staff are highly committed to improving their practice and work well as a team. The staff who responded to the inspection questionnaire praise the support they receive from the deputy headteacher and the assistant headteacher. Key stage leaders and the lead for the Differentiated Learning Centre (DLC) have many skills and use these well to conduct robust monitoring of provision. You are determined to ensure that assessment is used accurately to raise expectations so that more pupils achieve valuable qualifications by the time they leave school. In order to reach this laudable aim, more must be done to match activities more closely to pupils' abilities and to challenge the most able pupils.

You are effectively prioritising the welfare and personal development of pupils. Leaders and staff work well together to create a tolerant community where diversity is valued and where pupils are helped to belong regardless of their background, race, religion or sexuality. The school is rightly proud of the work undertaken to promote the good social and emotional health of young people. The 'family leaders' know pupils well and hold frequent meetings to share important information about pupils' safety and well-being. The senior leadership team is newly formed and its full positive impact is not yet demonstrated. Senior leaders must ensure even greater consistency in how staff implement certain important policies.

The school, totally rebuilt after the 2012 inspection, offers excellent facilities. A few parents and governors are concerned about the growth of the school. It is asked to take on more pupils and appears to be suffering from its own success. The number of pupils on roll is slightly over the school's capacity but staff are working very well together to manage this. The grounds, corridors, common areas and classrooms are large enough to accommodate the current number of pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

Senior leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Records are detailed and of high quality. The single central record is kept up to date and all necessary checks are made when appointing staff.

The school's business manager is well organised and meticulous. She follows up references for recently appointed staff diligently. You have improved the practice for the administration of medication and the well-run medical room is a welcome addition to the school's resources. Risk assessments are robust.

The deputy headteacher, who is also the designated safeguarding lead, monitors vulnerable pupils effectively. Pupils are taught how to keep safe and how to tell an adult should they be worried about poor behaviour, such as bullying. The curriculum helps them to understand and manage risks, such as when using the internet and social networking sites.

Staff are quick to identify and follow up any concerns that they have about individuals. Senior leaders work effectively with external agencies so that pupils get the help that they need quickly. The local authority and senior officer from Herts for Learning offer additional support and challenge to ensure that policies are kept up to date and applied well.

At the school's previous inspections, leaders were asked to work with the local authority to improve the way behaviour was managed on buses. This has been done. The bus escorts log incidents, and behaviour on transport is carefully managed.

Inspection findings

- For this inspection, we identified four specific areas of focus in addition to checking the school's culture of safeguarding. We investigated the quality of assessment. We reviewed the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy. We looked at how staff help pupils develop their independence. We checked the effectiveness of leadership, management and governance in the light of the recent review of leadership responsibilities.
- You have identified the development of assessment processes as a key priority. The newly appointed assistant headteacher is leading this work well. The current system makes the recording of pupils' achievement quite straightforward and the colour-coding provides an instant overview of how well pupils are progressing across subjects of the curriculum. Current performance information shows that vulnerable groups are doing as well as other pupils from their starting points. The large majority of pupils are making good progress against their targets. Senior leaders use data effectively to inform pupil progress meetings. Further challenge is required to accelerate the progress of the most able pupils.
- At the previous inspection, staff were asked to improve the quality of teaching further, in particular to extend pupils' literacy skills. You have an accurate view of the quality of teaching across the school and where it needs to improve. Teachers plan lessons that offer interesting sequences of activities to promote good learning. Phonics skills are taught well. Pupils are encouraged to write long sentences, such as in science where pupils wrote up their experiment about

testing which cup would keep their tea hot longest. In some subjects, the use of worksheets limits the quality of pupils' written work.

- Staff find many ways of practising pupils' numeracy skills in lessons and through extra-curricular activities. For example, in computing, pupils were analysing pie charts and bar charts well. In food technology, they were counting sugar cubes in drinks. These effective, hands-on experiences bring learning to life. One pupil was outraged when the teacher asked: 'Should we have this high-energy sugary drink for breakfast?'. Pupils learn to use numbers in a real-life context. Some, who could cope well, are not exposed enough to demanding problem-solving tasks.
- Preparing pupils to become more independent is central to the school's work. Transition from primary school to Year 7 is planned well. The Year 11 pupils told one inspector that the visit to the college, which took place on the day of this inspection, was very good. All Year 11 pupils have a place at a college for September 2017 and many know what they want to do as a future career. Your decision to introduce qualifications in functional skills contributes to pupils' good personal development and academic success. The 'pathways to independence' programme used in the DLC and the personal, social, health and citizenship education curriculum make a positive difference to pupils. They become more resilient and learn what it means to be good citizens in modern Britain. Some also learn well from their mistakes as staff guide them to understand and apply the rules of law and order.
- The final line of enquiry for this inspection was to check whether the senior leaders' responsibilities were clear and strategies well implemented. The senior leadership team began its work formally in September 2016. Further work is required to ensure that the school's protocols and procedures are followed by all staff. Senior leaders know what they have to do but some initiatives are not yet embedded fully. You are continuing to work hard on this. Your successes include rigorous checks on the quality of teaching and on the impact of additional funding to ascertain whether the interventions to support pupils who fall behind in their learning are making a real difference.
- As a new headteacher, you have been careful not to bring too much change at once. However, a very small number of parents are not yet in full support of the new style of leadership. Some information is not always easy to find on the website. Many parents acknowledge the positive features of the school. Staff create and sustain positive and trusting relationships with pupils. We found that the behaviour policy is applied with a high level of consistency. This leads to the calm and orderly atmosphere that is evident in all parts of the school. You are working closely with the local authority and senior officers from Herts for Learning. You are open to their advice and guidance.
- Governors are highly knowledgeable and bring a wealth of expertise to the school. The growth of the school and changes in the nature of its intake are managed well. The adopt-a-governor approach, linking each governor to a 'family group' of pupils, raises governors' awareness and understanding of pupils' specific academic and welfare needs. Although I was not able to meet the new chair of the governing body, governors praise her leadership, her knowledge of

the school and, as the local pastor, her understanding of the local community.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching is improved further and expectations are raised so that work matches the needs of all pupils and progress, particularly for those with high starting points, is accelerated
- communication with families is consolidated, including through the school's website
- senior leaders check that their work makes a real difference and that all staff adhere to the school's policies and procedures.

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

Marianick Ellender-Gelé
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, governors and various groups of pupils. We observed pupils' learning in a series of short visits to classes, and most of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's senior leadership team. I had a telephone discussion with the school's improvement partner and, at the end of the day, I met briefly with the education service director (vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils) from Herts for Learning. The Ofsted Inspector and I scrutinised a range of school documentation, including policies, the school's self-evaluation, the school's improvement plan, safeguarding records and information about pupils' achievement and behaviour. We considered the views expressed in 38 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, together with 27 additional comments from parents, 55 questionnaires completed by pupils with the support of staff and 28 questionnaires returned by school staff. We also looked at the school's own annual parent surveys.