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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Les Milton
Headteacher
Laleham Gap School
Ozengell Place
Ramsgate
Kent
CT12 6FH

Dear Mr Milton

Short inspection of Laleham Gap School

Following my visit to the school on 5 July 2017 with Jane Edwards, 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 March 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since taking up your appointment in January 2017, you have wasted no time in setting out your vision and completing the groundwork required to move the school forward. You work collegiately with the various members of your senior leadership team. Together, you have reassessed the school's strengths and identified the key areas leaders will need to improve for the school to become outstanding. With the support and well-judged guidance of the governing body, and in partnership with the local authority, you have created the capacity for the school to improve rapidly in the future.

Our classroom visits showed the school to be a happy place, where pupils enjoy learning and make good progress. Relationships are strong. Teaching and support staff know pupils very well and have a clear understanding of both their academic, and social and emotional needs. Relationships between pupils are also strong, as witnessed in an art lesson where pupils evaluated each other's work, clearly articulating their opinions in a mature and forthright manner. Pupils were happy to share their work with inspectors. Most were able to tell inspectors very clearly about what they were learning, and why. This included children in Reception, who were happy to tell me about their favourite song, 'Bingo', and how they enjoy learning about 'words'.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors highlighted the many strengths of the

school, including that senior leaders had a clear vision and accurate view of the school's strengths, and that good teaching ensured that all groups of pupils were making good progress. They also identified the need for leaders to ensure that teachers planned lessons to fully meet the needs of all pupils, and that teaching assistants should be used more effectively to support learning. Leaders have dealt with these matters successfully. Both inspectors witnessed support staff making effective interventions to consolidate or enhance learning. Modelling the transfer of energy in a science lesson and the widespread use of targeted questioning to confirm understanding, or add further challenge, were good examples of this. Classroom visits confirmed that teachers plan learning to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities, and that the levels of expectation are appropriate most of the time.

Since the last inspection, leaders have continued the important process of self-evaluation. Since your arrival, this has quite rightly been given a very high priority. You were able to explain clearly the school's many strengths, as well as the areas that need to be developed. Your work in partnership with other special schools to enhance systems to assess pupils' academic progress and social and emotional development is going well, although is not yet complete. We agreed that developing middle leaders' understanding of their strategic role in improving all aspects of the school should be a key priority going forward. You agreed with me that sharing the good practice and teaching expertise already in the school, including between different key stages, will help improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment to become outstanding.

Safeguarding is effective.

Arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective. Policies, procedures and systems are robust and day-to-day routines are comprehensive. The single central record of staff checks is sound. Staff training is thorough and up to date and has recently focused on key national priorities.

The school's culture to protect children and keep staff and pupils safe is well developed. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in school and that they trust staff to deal with their concerns. The vast majority of parents who used the online parent questionnaire agree that their children are safe at the school. However, there have been some valid concerns raised by parents and staff about various aspects of the new school site. Leaders are working urgently in partnership with the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the contractors to address these concerns.

Inspection findings

- Most pupils are making good or better progress in a range of subjects from their different starting points. School leaders track the progress of pupils well. Progress meetings are held at regular intervals to allow leaders and teaching staff to identify pupils who are in danger of falling behind. Revised systems to assess and monitor pupils' progress are effective, but need more time to embed.
- Classroom visits showed pupils to be making good progress over time. Scrutiny of books and teachers' own systems to track progress and identify gaps in learning

showed evidence of pupils making good or better progress. In some cases, it was also clear to see the small steps of progress pupils were making as inspectors looked on. However, occasionally teachers' expectations were not high enough, because pupils found the work they were doing too easy.

- The curriculum meets the needs of pupils well. In the primary phase, the topic-based curriculum engages pupils well. Combining subjects into one topic theme creates capacity in the timetable. It also allows teachers and support staff, including speech and language therapists, to focus on language skills, while enabling pupils to make the connections required to consolidate their learning.
- Pupils in the secondary phase of the school benefit from a bespoke curriculum which evolves year on year. This enables teachers to address the specific needs of each cohort, so that the correct balance between subject knowledge and developing life and language skills can be maintained. Enrichment opportunities, including contributing to local art exhibitions, or residential trips to face the excitement and challenge of outdoor adventurous activities, are all well established as part of the wider curriculum.
- The school's provision for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is strong. Leaders and governors monitor the progress of disadvantaged pupils well. As a result, staff are very focused on ensuring that these pupils make the progress required. Additional support and interventions are put in place when needed, including extra sessions with occupational or speech and language therapists if required. School leaders have been successful at reducing the rates of absence of disadvantaged pupils this year. This is particularly the case with persistent absence, which has fallen significantly.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the roles of middle leaders are further developed, so that middle leaders have more of an impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning
- systems to assess and monitor pupils' progress are further developed, so that they become a fully effective tool for teachers and leaders to improve outcomes for pupils
- good practice evident in classrooms is shared, so that it has a positive impact on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all phases of the school
- further enhancements to improve the environment and security of the school's site are completed without delay.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Kent. This letter will be

published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Clive Close

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors visited classrooms, monitoring the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, talking to pupils about their learning and assessing the quality of their work. Inspectors were accompanied by senior leaders during classroom visits. Inspectors assessed pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning in classrooms and around the school. Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, the chair of the governing body, accompanied by one other governor, and two different groups of pupils. I talked to a representative of the local authority on the telephone. Inspectors took into account 36 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and accompanying free-text responses. Inspectors also considered 27 replies to the staff questionnaire. A wide range of documentation was scrutinised, including pupils' progress information, the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies, minutes of governing body meetings and records of visits by the local authority.