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Mrs Heather Austin
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Dear Mrs Austin

Short inspection of Chesnut Lodge Special School

Following my visit to the school on 18 July 2017 with Elizabeth Clarke, 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 was judged to be good in November 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have ensured that leaders, governors and staff share your determination to promote the school's core aims of 'opening minds, unlocking potential and celebrating success'. Collectively, you demonstrate an unswerving commitment to helping all pupils develop socially and academically so they can lead happy, healthy and successful lives.

Many things make Chesnut Lodge a good school. You and your team have taken great care to ensure that the school is a safe and welcoming place where pupils learn well. Pupils speak positively about the school, particularly about their relationships with members of staff and each other. For example, one pupil spoke in glowing terms about the staff when he described them as 'always being there for you, no matter what'. Another pupil highlighted the strength of friendships at the school when he described his friends fondly as people who 'help you and let you be yourself'. Parents also value the school's work. The vast majority of parents indicate that they would recommend the school to others. Typical comments from parents include: 'This school goes above and beyond every day to make my son's learning journey one of fun, excellence and security' and 'My children love this school; they are happy and feel safe.'

Staff are also positive about the school. You have ensured that staff morale is high and that effective teamwork underpins the school's work. Staff value the varied

training opportunities that help them to develop their practice in different areas. One member of staff summed up the view of many succinctly when she described the school as 'a lovely place to work, with a warm and vibrant staff and fabulous children'.

Since the previous inspection, there have been considerable changes to staffing at the school. Although your leadership team has remained unchanged, half of the school's teachers are relatively new to the school. You have also increased the number of support staff to meet the increasingly complex needs of the pupils. You have ensured that training opportunities for new staff are extensive and carefully matched to the demands of their work. As a result, you now have full confidence in the skills and knowledge of your staff.

You have addressed the areas for improvement from the previous inspection in a robust and convincing manner. You have gone to great lengths to extend the frequency and scope of your partnership work with other schools. You have worked closely with schools such as Hazelbeck School in Bradford to develop the accuracy of your assessment. You have also worked with a range of special and mainstream schools in different local authorities to enable staff to see teaching in other contexts. Teachers in the secondary phase have also developed a thematic curriculum as a result of the school's collaborative work.

The last inspection also highlighted the need to ensure that information about pupils' attainment and progress is analysed effectively. The school's information indicates that outcomes for pupils have improved sharply in the last two years. This is partly due to the improved monitoring of pupils' achievements. Monitoring systems are clear and transparent. A governor is linked to each class in the school and governors ask probing questions about the progress being made by pupils. Leaders have also ensured that teachers are set appropriately challenging targets for pupils' achievement as part of their performance management. As a result, an increasing proportion of pupils are making fast progress across the curriculum.

You have also introduced effective systems for ensuring that pupils who have extended periods away from school due to medical reasons are well supported. You have appointed a member of staff to develop home-school links and she has set about her duties with vigour and tact. Pupils who are absent from school for prolonged periods are taught a weekly face-to-face lesson. The school has also developed excellent links with local hospitals and providers of respite care, so that staff in those settings can continue to provide appropriate education for pupils when they are absent from Chesnut Lodge. Despite this work, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school has increased sharply this year. Although leaders know every pupils' individual situation in detail, their tracking of persistent absence and those pupils at risk of persistent absence lacks precision.

Leaders have therefore ensured that the school has continued to improve since the previous inspection. Despite this, leaders' current plans for improvement are not specific enough. They do not contain quantifiable targets that would enable leaders and governors to measure progress more clearly. Furthermore, leaders do not

currently have any clear plans for improving the effectiveness of teaching across the school. The quality of leaders' checks on the impact of teaching are also inconsistent. As a result, weaknesses in teaching are not identified consistently.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that staff in all areas of the school are very clear that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Keeping children safe is at the forefront of the school's work and nothing is left to chance. As a result, there is a very strong safeguarding culture at the school and safeguarding is a thread that runs throughout all aspects of the school's work. All policies and procedures are detailed. Some innovative work has been undertaken by the school council to write pupil-friendly versions of the school's safeguarding and e-safety policies. All staff receive regular training and are aware of how to make referrals using the school's systems. Staff know the pupils exceptionally well and are highly attentive to any changes in their mood or presentation.

Pupils are able to communicate their understanding of safety confidently. For example, one pupil told an inspector he was able to speak to them because they were wearing a school lanyard that identified them as an authorised visitor. You have also ensured that you work effectively with parents on matters of safety. For example, the results of a recent 'keep safe' pupil survey were shared with parents so they could understand the areas in which they needed to support their children. The school works effectively with a range of external agencies to keep pupils safe. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are appropriately detailed.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of issues to do with the school's effectiveness, such as how well teaching supports pupils of different abilities and how well the curriculum prepares pupils for life after Chesnut Lodge.
- Teachers ensure that low- and middle-ability pupils complete work that is carefully matched to their needs. However, the level of challenge for the most able pupils is not consistently as effective as it is for other groups. This is because teachers' expectations of what the most able pupils are capable of achieving are not always high enough.
- Teachers and other adults make a valuable contribution to ensuring that the majority of pupils make strong progress in lessons. They question pupils effectively, spot misconceptions quickly and model new skills clearly.
- You and other leaders have ensured that the curriculum is carefully designed, regularly reviewed and modified frequently. The school's work to promote British values and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding are exemplary. For example, pupils have a very strong understanding of the importance of democracy because of the meaningful work undertaken by the democratically-elected school council, eco council and 'healthy stars'. Pupils also communicate with pen-pals from a school in India to enhance their

understanding of different cultures. As a result, the curriculum plays a very strong role in preparing pupils for life after Chesnut Lodge.

- The school's approach to transition is proactive and thorough at all stages. Staff work very closely with children and their parents before they join the early years provision. Arrangements for transition through the school are meticulous. Information is carefully shared between staff. In order to aid continuity, leaders ensure that some of the same staff stay with different groups as they advance through the school. Pupils are supported from Year 9 with their post-16 choices. They receive independent careers guidance that enables them to make informed decisions about their next steps. Leaders ensure that pupils in Year 11 make regular visits to their post-16 destinations to ensure that transition is smooth and seamless. As a result of this work, all pupils advance to further education and stay there until at least their 19th birthday.
- Leaders have ensured that the school's systems for dealing with bullying are effective. Members of staff focus on developing pupils' understanding of what bullying is. Pupils told one of the inspectors that bullying is 'when people say bad things and it makes you want to cry' and that 'it needs to happen more than once'. The staff, pupils and parents who spoke with inspectors were adamant that there is no bullying at the school. The pupils also expressed confidence that, should bullying happen, it would be dealt with quickly and effectively by staff. The school's open culture also makes a strong contribution to an effective anti-bullying strategy. Staff and pupils converse openly and pupils feel confident about letting adults know how they feel. The school plays a role in the local authority's anti-bullying strategy. The school is also in the early stages of participating in the national 'all together anti-bullying alliance'. As a result, the school's work to prevent bullying is exceptionally strong.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- plans to improve the school are specific and ambitious, particularly in relation to developing teaching and learning
- the most able pupils are challenged systematically so they make the fastest possible progress
- systems for tracking the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school are refined, so the school can ensure that it does everything realistically possible to reduce the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from 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 Halton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you and your senior leaders, four members of the governing body and groups of staff from the primary and secondary phase. Inspectors also met with the school's two improvement partners. Inspectors observed lessons in all classes. We met with groups of pupils from the primary and secondary phase, spoke with a number of parents and took account of seven 'free-text' comments from parents. Inspectors considered 39 responses to 'Parent View', the online questionnaire for parents and 30 responses to the staff questionnaire. There were no responses to the pupil questionnaire. Inspectors scrutinised a range of information provided by the school, including your self-evaluation, improvement plan and records of teaching and learning. Inspectors also looked closely at the single central record and other safeguarding procedures and practices.