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8 December 2017

Mr Ian Carden
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Dear Mr Carden

Short inspection of Ridgewood Community High School

Following my visit to the school on 30 November 2017 with Martin Hanbury, 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 February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Over time, leaders have embedded a shared vision across the school which prioritises the promotion of inclusivity. It focuses relentlessly on developing independence and is underpinned by a shared commitment to developing aspiration and resilience among pupils. Parents are effusive about the school. They say the school feels like an 'extended family' and they value the support they receive from staff. Parents typically say their children have grown in confidence and they are delighted with the academic progress they are making. A typical comment from a parent was: 'My child even runs into school as he is excited to be there, and he gets upset if he is too ill to attend.' Another parent said: 'I couldn't wish anything more for my child.'

The leadership team has ensured that positive relationships underpin all that the school does. Pupils greatly value the support and guidance they receive from staff. They typically describe staff as 'very polite and very helpful'. They enjoy their lessons and appreciate the many activities that are designed to increase their independence. Members of staff also speak highly about working at the school. They are proud to work at Ridgewood and share leaders' ambitions for the school's future. Staff appreciate the consideration that leaders show for their well-being. They recognise that leaders' expectations of them have increased since the previous inspection, but say: 'We are given time to discuss and implement new procedures and support is always available.'

Since the previous inspection, the school has continued to grow and move forward. The leadership team has developed in size, expertise and experience. In particular, the responsibility for leading safeguarding has been effectively distributed among several leaders. This has further strengthened the school's approach to keeping children safe, while creating the capacity for leaders to undertake a broader range of work to carry out improvements across the school. For example, some innovative work has been undertaken to develop assessment as part of the North West Special School Assessment Group.

You became headteacher in September 2017 to start a new chapter in the school's history. Members of staff describe how you have embarked upon an 'exciting new journey'. In a short period of time you have clarified the roles and responsibilities of your staff. You and your leadership team have high expectations of all members of the school community. You have quickly developed a perceptive, balanced and precise understanding of the school's strengths and relative weaknesses. Your plans to improve the school are ambitious and specific. You share responsibilities among a wide range of staff and consult everyone when making decisions. As a result of the additional motivation for change you have brought to the school, fast improvements are being made to teaching and systems for improving attendance. You have also brought a vigour and vitality to the school, which is epitomised in the improvements that have been made to assemblies. Pupils are proud to receive rewards in front of their peers. Regular opportunities for pupils to address others during assemblies make a further contribution to the development of their communication skills and self-esteem.

Leaders have effectively addressed the areas for improvement that inspectors identified during the previous inspection. You have ensured that the most able pupils are effectively challenged in lessons. Pupils are now streamed by ability. Teachers also sub-divide their classes into three or four groups that they base on pupils' needs, aptitudes and abilities. Furthermore, teachers have become adept at providing all pupils with work that is carefully matched to their abilities. Teachers provide the most able pupils with work that consistently challenges them to make strong progress. Some of the most able pupils have studied GCSE subjects alongside peers from mainstream schools. The most able are also supported so that they become reflective and proactive learners. They are aware of how they learn and work with staff to ensure that teaching meets their needs. Adults question the most able pupils skilfully and this further supports the strong progress that the most able pupils make.

Leaders have also ensured that staff have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. Teachers and teaching assistants are skilled at helping pupils to become more independent in their learning. Staff are skilled at facilitating learning and provide the careful support that is needed for pupils to complete demanding work on their own. Staff also make better use of individual target cards in lessons. The target cards now contain the main academic targets from pupils' individual education plans. They are written in language that pupils can understand. Pupils are able to explain what their strengths are and what they need to do to improve further. Leaders have also improved assessment across the curriculum so it provides

pupils and staff with a clear overview of pupils' current attainment, their strengths and what they need to do next. Consequently, assessment in mathematics is now as effective as it is in English.

Leaders have sharpened their evaluation of interventions to support pupils' social and emotional development. However, you recognise that there are still weaknesses in the way that leaders measure the effectiveness of additional academic support. In particular, you acknowledge that leaders' evaluations of the impact of the pupil premium funding have been vague and generalised in the past. You also appreciate that this issue is symptomatic of broader weaknesses in the strategic use of information about pupils' progress. Leaders do not routinely track the progress of different groups of pupils, such as the disadvantaged and most able. Although you are quickly implementing systems that will enable you to do this, leaders and governors do not currently have a clear strategic oversight of the progress made by different groups.

You are therefore acutely aware that there is still scope for improving the work of the school. For example, although your staff have halted the decline in attendance, there has not yet been an improvement in either rates of attendance or the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have created a strong safeguarding culture within the school. Leaders and staff share a clear understanding of the ways in which pupils are potentially more vulnerable as a result of their special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders have ensured that staff are exceptionally vigilant to any changes in pupils' mood or behaviour. Your team works effectively with parents to keep their children safe. The work of the pupil support manager acts as a focal point for involving parents. Parents are invited to a range of social gatherings at school that help them to develop warm and supportive relationships with each other and school staff. These relationships, in turn, make parents more receptive to the school's efforts to enlist their support in matters relating to safety. For example, e-safety workshops for parents have helped reduce the risks associated with their children being online.

Leaders have also ensured that the curriculum helps pupils to develop a clear understanding of safety. For example, pupils learn about road safety, drugs and alcohol, and what constitutes healthy relationships. Members of staff also utilise a number of systems that ensure all pupils have a voice. For example, staff are adept at using visual communication systems to ensure that pupils with little or no speech can explain how they feel. You also have exemplary systems in place for supporting pupils' emotional well-being and resilience.

Leaders have ensured that all staff undertake regular training on matters relating to safety. They refer concerns, as appropriate, to leaders. Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding records are precise and fit for purpose. They work effectively with a range of external agencies to keep pupils safe.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these was to look at whether pupils, including the disadvantaged and most able, make fast progress throughout the school. You presented detailed information about pupils' progress, which shows that pupils make good progress overall. However, soon after starting as headteacher, you correctly identified that the school was not closely analysing the progress made by different groups of pupils. You are therefore in the process of establishing systems that will enable you to carefully measure the progress made by different groups of pupils.
- A second line of enquiry focused on how effectively the curriculum provides pupils with sufficient breadth of experience to be happy and successful after leaving Ridgewood. Leaders have a clear rationale for the design of the curriculum. The development of literacy, numeracy and communication skills assumes central importance across all three key stages. However, equal importance is attached to the development of skills and knowledge across the broader curriculum.
- Leaders also have a clear vision for how the curriculum supports pupils in becoming increasingly independent as they advance through the school. For example, during key stage 4 there is a greater focus on vocational learning. Pupils also benefit from a broad range of personalised interventions that are focused on removing individual barriers to learning. For example, some pupils work with staff to develop their understanding of phonics, whereas others develop strategies that help them to regulate their own emotions and behaviour.
- Finally, we looked at whether the trend towards increasing absence had been halted. You explained how you have prioritised developments in this area. You have created a shared understanding among pupils and staff that attendance is everyone's responsibility. Your team has increased the range of strategies that they use to promote good attendance. Pupils enjoy receiving the weekly attendance trophy for the class with the best attendance. Staff conduct regular home visits to reassure parents that pupils with complex medical needs are safe and well supported in school.
- Attendance figures for the 2016/17 academic year indicate that the school has arrested the decline in attendance. Information from the current academic year confirms that this is the case. Despite this, rates of attendance are still not improving. Consequently, rates of absence and the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school remain narrowly below the national average for special schools.
- Leaders were able to show that many of the pupils who are regularly absent from school have complex medical needs. Furthermore, they demonstrated how staff from the school work closely with families during periods of extended absence to ensure that, where appropriate, momentum is maintained in academic learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- develop systems for tracking pupils' progress to provide a clear overview of how well different groups of pupils, including the disadvantaged and most able, are performing in different areas of the curriculum
- carefully evaluate the impact of strategies for improving teaching and outcomes
- further develop systems for improving attendance so rates of absence begin to decrease.

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

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you and other leaders, including those responsible for safeguarding. We also met with members of the governing body. We spoke with the school's improvement partner and an external consultant who the school has commissioned to support its plans for improvement. We met formally with groups of pupils and talked informally with others around the school. We met formally with a group of staff, which included teachers and teaching assistants.

Leaders accompanied us on visits to classes, where we observed teaching and learning in a range of subjects. We also looked at work produced by pupils throughout the school in English and mathematics.

We examined a range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding. We also scrutinised a range of policies, the school improvement plan and self-evaluation report. Inspectors also looked at the school's website.

As part of the inspection, we considered 58 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. We also looked at 31 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire and 20 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents. An inspector spoke to parents at the start of the day, and three comments received by Ofsted's free-text facility were also considered.