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Mr Nicholas Maxwell
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Dear Mr Maxwell

Short inspection of Cedar Hall School

Following my visit to the school on 27 February 2018 with John Mitcheson HMI, 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 school was judged to be good in October 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 becoming headteacher shortly after the last inspection, you have worked hard to develop your leadership team further by getting leaders to focus on improving the outcomes for individual pupils. You work tirelessly to ensure that every pupil who attends Cedar Hall School leaves with the skills needed for the next stage of their lives. The school has taken appropriate action to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.

Your school provides great learning experiences that have a lasting impact on your pupils. Parents and carers consistently recognise this, and they said how important the curriculum is in meeting the special educational needs (SEN) of their children. Pupils continue to make good progress, and all pupils leaving the school at the end of Year 11 go on to further education, employment or training.

Pupils try their best and are enthusiastic to share their work with others. They are rightly proud of their achievements. Some pupils have had a difficult time in their education before coming to Cedar Hall. You and your staff have created a safe school in which they can thrive. Under your leadership, pupils learn to treat each other, staff and visitors with respect.

Leaders, teachers and the pupils themselves understand that lessons that are

matched to pupils' specific needs and interests, and are engaging, create the best learning environment. Some pupils also recognise that there are occasions when learning does not challenge them sufficiently. Leaders are taking effective action to improve this. Staff realise that they need to check regularly that their planning ensures that all pupils are challenged sufficiently.

Your leadership team and governors have an accurate picture of the strengths of the school and what needs to be improved. You have increased the depth of information available to leaders through a range of new procedures to check the quality and effectiveness of the school's work. You acknowledge that some of these procedures need to be sharpened and embedded further to ensure that they impact fully on the quality of provision. Not all leaders concisely evaluate and analyse the information they have for their area of responsibility to drive improvement even further.

You have taken effective action to improve pupils' attendance. The improvements are due to new approaches to monitoring the attendance of each pupil, and you are taking early action to support those who are regularly absent from school. This is having an impact on the attendance rate, but leaders are aware that, with refinement and more time, attendance could improve even further.

You have accurately targeted increasing pupils' literacy and mathematics skills by gaining greater consistency in teaching throughout all key stages. Teachers are enthusiastic about their subjects. You make good use of the procedures to manage the performance of staff, to ensure that teachers share and improve their practice. Teachers feel that leaders provide good professional development opportunities to encourage, challenge and support their improvement. A large majority of staff feel well supported by the leadership team and, overall, staff morale is high.

Governors are aware of the improvements that have been made since the last inspection. They feel that the school is 'on a journey, but now with real direction'. The chair and other governors actively support a wide range of school activities. They understand accurately the strengths of the school and improvements to be made. You have encouraged governors to make regular visits and take a full part in the school community. They provide you with good support to improve the school. This can be seen in the many recent improvements to the site and their effective action to make the most of the school budget.

Pupils told us that they feel safe at school and almost all would recommend the school to a friend. The vast majority of parents, carers, pupils and staff who responded during the inspection were positive about the school and your leadership. One parent said, 'The staff at Cedar Hall are simply wonderful. I've never known such dedicated and enthusiastic teachers and support staff, and each one we've encountered has had such an amazing approach to meeting my son's special needs.'

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a priority for the whole school community and reflects the specific, specialist needs of the pupils and their families. Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, and records are detailed and of a high quality. Leaders keep staff and governors up to date about safeguarding matters through a regular programme of training, updates and reminders. All staff have received training across a range of areas of safeguarding and child protection. Policies are up to date. Staff understand how to recognise any signs that a pupil is at risk, and know what to do if they have any concerns.

Pupils said that they feel safe and know how to seek help from staff when needed. They are confident and could talk about how they would deal with an incident, including bullying. Some of the most able pupils are able to talk confidently about how they keep themselves safe, and all the pupils are aware and tolerant of the needs of others.

Inspection findings

- To determine whether the school remains good, I followed three lines of enquiry during the inspection. These were based on issues raised in the last inspection, recent performance information and an analysis of the school's website.
- My first line of enquiry concerned how effective leaders have been at increasing attendance, reducing fixed-term exclusions and considering the welfare of pupils. Attendance has improved since the last inspection, following the introduction of 'attendance files' to record and monitor pupils' absence. It is currently close to the national average. Any pupils whose attendance dips below 90% are targeted for additional support. All staff are expected to take full responsibility for the pastoral welfare of pupils, including their attendance.
- The welfare of pupils is at the core of the school's work. Pupils' behaviour and their approach to the learning are excellent. Staff provide a deep range of support and extra-curricular activities. This includes a counsellor to support vulnerable pupils and provide them with early help, and a speech and language therapist. Leaders understand the complex challenges of this community. Permanent exclusions are rare and fixed-term exclusions are closely monitored. Leaders agreed with inspectors that the proportion of pupils temporarily excluded from school needs to be closely monitored.
- A wide range of extra-curricular activities further supports pupils' welfare and engagement. This includes lunchtime and after-school clubs, a youth club that operates until 9pm on a weekly basis, and three annual residential visits. Families and pupils value these opportunities highly and appreciate the enormous effort and support given by staff to achieve these.
- My second line of enquiry looked at how effectively leaders adapt the curriculum to help pupils achieve. The curriculum is well balanced and engages all pupils across the primary, middle and high school phases. In the primary phase, teachers skilfully engage pupils with exciting topic-based work, while focusing on developing core skills in small groups. Classrooms are full of exciting and

stimulating displays and learning activities around each topic. For example, inspectors travelled across the landmarks of London and into ancient Egypt when crossing a corridor. In the middle school phase, classes are organised according to the specific needs and abilities of pupils. This allows you to target the curriculum further to provide the continuity that each pupil needs. As the pupils move into the secondary department, the focus moves onto the wide range of examinations and qualifications, and you provide them with good opportunities to develop skills for life. These include entry-level qualifications for almost every subject and GCSE qualifications for the more able. This year, 22 pupils achieved the Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award.

- Staff assess pupils on entry to gain a baseline of their ability and interests. They focus on working with each pupil to develop core literacy and mathematics skills. Years 10 and 11 pupils attend local colleges one day each week to broaden their experience of working with other pupils and adults outside of school. In Year 11, all pupils have a two-week work experience placement. This early experience of the workplace makes a huge contribution to increasing their confidence and self-esteem. When pupils leave, they all go on to employment, education or training in the local area.
- You use the pupil premium effectively to support and meet the individual needs of pupils. For example, it is used to provide a link worker outside school to talk through the issues of the day with pupils and parents. This helps to smooth out challenging issues across school and home. You use it to tailor provision to meet individual pupils' needs. For example, by making arrangements for a temporary part-time timetable, you were able to show the impact this had on reducing incidents of poor behaviour. This made the school day more productive and enabled the pupil to return to full-time learning.
- My third line of enquiry looked at the extent to which leaders have addressed the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. At the last inspection, you were asked to deepen the thinking of all pupils by showing them how they can improve their learning in lessons. To achieve this, you have actively sought challenge and support from the local authority, and this is continuing. You also work collaboratively with the Benfleet and Thundersley Inter School Cluster (BATIC Trust), and the Essex Special Schools Educational Trust (ESSET) to ensure that the school gains from the good practice in other local schools. On learning walks, we found skillful use of questioning in lessons. By ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning remains under closer scrutiny, the school is raising overall standards. Where pupils are engaged, they are keen to share their enjoyment of their learning. They use this enthusiasm to have deep discussions about their learning.
- At that last inspection, you were also asked to give less experienced teachers more opportunities to observe the best teaching in the school. A recent development is to link teaching colleagues together to share and develop practice. This is new this year and needs more time to become embedded and to be fully evaluated.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- at all levels, leaders concisely evaluate and analyse the information they have for their area of responsibility to drive improvement even further
- newly introduced procedures become embedded and are thoroughly evaluated to ensure that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment continues to improve
- when tackling absence to improve overall attendance, the school responds at a faster rate, using its newly developed procedures.

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

Yours sincerely

Fyfe Johnston
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

We held meetings with you, senior and middle leaders and a group of staff. We also met with a group of governors and a school effectiveness partner from the local authority. We observed pupils learning in different lessons throughout the school. This was done jointly with you or other senior leaders. We observed pupils' behaviour during lessons and around the school. We spoke with pupils informally and met with a representative group from Year 6 to Year 10. We looked at their work in lessons. A wide range of documents was considered, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour, examination results and your monitoring of teaching and learning. Inspectors looked at the school's self-evaluation and development plans. We also considered 43 responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and free-text responses. Inspectors also took into account 20 pupil responses and 39 staff responses from those who completed Ofsted's online questionnaires.