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Mrs Jane Richardson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Richardson

Short inspection of Victoria Lane Academy

Following my visit to the school on 19 September 2018, 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 May 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Staff feel very well supported by leaders and are proud to work in this happy school that sits at the heart of its community. Parents and pupils feel welcome and valued. Parents find staff 'extremely approachable', saying that they go 'above and beyond' to help and support them. Pupils are confident that adults in school are 'caring' and 'helpful'. Displays in and around school show that you have enormous respect for pupils, holding their work and efforts in high esteem. The positive, friendly ethos and attractive, well-maintained site are testament to your efforts to provide a safe, welcoming space for all.

The previous inspection challenged you to raise standards in writing. Together with your leadership team, you have tackled this area with diligence. Pupils enjoy writing. In each key stage, their handwriting skills have improved substantially. Pupils apply their knowledge and skills with particular care and to increasing effect in their 'gold writing' books as they move through school. Consequently, the proportion of pupils in key stages 1 and 2 reaching and exceeding age-related expectations in writing has been maintained at or above the national average over time. In key stage 2 specifically, disadvantaged pupils' progress in writing has been in the top 20% of schools nationally for at least two years. In addition, a higher proportion of key stage 2 pupils meet age-related expectations in English grammar, spelling and punctuation than in other schools nationally, year on year.

You have, quite rightly, put reading high on your agenda for further development.

You are currently working with pupils to stock and revamp the key stage 2 library. Strengthened links with local library services aim to encourage pupils and families to read regularly together for pleasure. Leaders have also asked pupils about their reading preferences, taking these into account when buying or borrowing new books. By the time pupils leave key stage 2, the vast majority have made at least good progress from their different starting points and are reading at the standards expected for their age. In 2018, more than half of Year 6 pupils were reading at the higher standard. Such successes ensure that pupils are well equipped to deal with increasingly sophisticated reading challenges such as those presented in the next key stage or the secondary curriculum.

Nonetheless, there is further work to do in terms of your reading curriculum. Leaders' strategic approach to the teaching, learning and assessment of reading is not yet fully embedded. Some variability in the quality of reading practices exists. At times, for example, pupils tackle books and reading materials that are not well matched to their skills or stage of development. This was clear when pupils read to the inspector. Pupils' reading records and school documents also show that leaders' systems for checking on the frequency, breadth and genre of pupils' reading choices are not transparent. Furthermore, due to recent changes in staffing, reading practices in the early years are not currently as consistent or well established as leaders would wish. While you have recognised each of these issues and have already taken action to address matters, reading clearly remains a key priority in improvement planning.

From their different starting points, the vast majority of pupils in each key stage make good progress in their learning across subjects. This is evident in pupils' books, the school's assessment information and also in the publicly available information which compares your pupils' achievements with others' nationally. In classes across the school, pupils display sensible learning behaviours, listening carefully to adults' instructions and explanations. You ensure that staff have regular good-quality training, equipping them with the secure subject knowledge needed to deliver the primary curriculum with confidence and a good degree of flair.

Occasionally, however, the progress made by pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities is more variable in some year groups and in some subjects. You and your special educational needs coordinator recognise this. In consultation with external partners, you are currently refining the way in which you check and assess progress for this group of pupils specifically. It is too soon to tell if your efforts will bring about the desired improvements.

Children in the early years are happy and very well looked after. There is an abundance of enticing play equipment and learning materials which children thoroughly enjoy investigating. You are particularly vigilant in making sure that there are plenty of caring adults available to meet children's personal, social and emotional needs, effectively. A nurturing ethos is tangible. This is a real strength of the early years team. Overall, children make good progress in their learning and development from their different starting points.

Some very recent changes in the early years and in leadership roles, however,

require leaders and governors to keep a watchful eye on this key stage. Your highly experienced early years leader has just been promoted to a wider role within the trust, resulting in some turbulence in staffing. Some subject leaders new to role lack confidence in their understanding of children's development and practices in the early years. Not all, for example, can confidently describe the role of the outdoor learning environment in promoting early literacy and numeracy. This inhibits the quality of some leaders' contributions to developments and improvements in the early years moving forward. The proportion of children reaching the early learning goals in the basic skills of reading, writing and numbers has been good over time. You have correctly pinpointed additional support and training for some leaders to ensure that the positive outcomes secured in recent years are maintained.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have established close links with families, the community and external agencies in a successful effort to make sure that vulnerable families get the support, help and services needed. Working in partnership with the local authority's attendance enforcement board, for example, has helped pupils and families to understand the importance of good attendance. Although still lower than the national average, pupils' attendance has improved overall. Additionally, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school has dropped to match national averages. Further work to maintain and build upon the improving picture of pupils' attendance is quite rightly woven into leaders' and governors' action plans.

High-quality, regular training takes place to keep staff abreast of the most recent safeguarding guidance. Systems for recording concerns are clear, reviewed regularly and are well maintained. Staff are vigilant and have a good understanding of their role in protecting pupils and keeping them safe from harm. As a result, pupils feel safe and are kept safe in this attentive environment. Parents who responded to Ofsted's survey and the school's own questionnaire feel confident that their children are well protected and looked after.

Inspection findings

- You and governors are successfully committed to ensuring that pupils access the full primary curriculum and make good progress across subjects. Pupils mention science and art as subjects they thoroughly enjoy and experience frequently. The proportion of pupils reaching the standards expected for their age in key stage 1 and 2, in science, has been sustained at or above the national average over time. Pupils' work displayed throughout the school environment demonstrates the extent to which their curriculum entitlement is met and celebrated.
- Pupils like books and reading. In the early years, attractive reading dens entice children to pick up books and develop an interest in reading. Nursery children are actively encouraged to develop the phonic skill of matching letters with sounds. Pupils in key stages 1 and 2 enjoy the recently introduced reading lessons at the start of each day. They are particularly enthused by the fact that adults read aloud to them every day; the class novels are a very big hit. Leaders are intent on fostering a lifelong love of reading in pupils. Most pupils leave at the end of

key stage 2 with the reading skills expected for their age.

- Nonetheless, a number of reading practices vary. Some pupils do not access a wide range of books that are well matched to their needs and reading proficiency. These pupils stick to a preferred genre, attempting texts that are too hard or too easy. A small proportion of pupils do not read as frequently as leaders expect. In addition, the approach to reading in the early years is not yet securely embedded.
- In the early years, staff are kind and considerate. They pay close attention to children's personal, social and emotional needs, meeting children's welfare needs, effectively. Staff have close, positive, enabling relationships with families. A renewed effort to increase partnerships with local nurseries means that more children are starting the Reception Year with skills that are typical for their age. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the time they leave the early years has been maintained at broadly in line with the national average over time. Proportions reaching the early learning goals in reading, writing and number are also in line with other schools nationally.
- Some leaders new to post, however, lack confidence in their knowledge and understanding of teaching, learning and assessment in the early years. As a result, these leaders are less able to demonstrate their effect on the quality of provision in this key stage.
- There is a high proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities compared to similar schools nationally. Most pupils make good progress in their learning and development compared with others from similar starting points across subjects. However, the books of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities learning in lessons and your own assessment information show that a small proportion do not make expected or better progress, in some subjects, especially in reading and writing. Your recent review of your SEN provision and current practices, undertaken with external partners, further corroborates these findings.
- You have taken decisive action to address issues of poor attendance. Over time, pupils' attendance has been below figures for comparable schools nationally. Also, too many pupils have been regularly absent from school. In 2017, for example, 17.9% of pupils were frequently absent. Your work with parents and pupils, however, is now bearing fruit. Overall rates of attendance are steadily improving and the proportion of pupils who were regularly absent in 2018 improved to be lower than the national average for 2017.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a clearly communicated, strategic approach to the teaching of reading across key stages is fully embedded
- all pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make good or better progress in their learning and development across the curriculum, and in reading and writing in particular
- all subject leaders have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the early

years curriculum and their role in securing good progress for children

- pupils' attendance continues to improve to meet national averages.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I observed teaching, learning and assessment in all year groups with you. I scrutinised the work in pupils' books, listened to pupils reading and spoke with pupils from each key stage. No pupils responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire. I reviewed school documentation and information, including policies, assessment information, monitoring files and your school improvement plans. I met with governors, including the chair of the governing body and the CEO of the trust. I held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. I talked with parents at the school gate and took account of nine free-text comments to Ofsted. There were too few responses made by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, to utilise. Seventeen staff responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire were also considered.