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Mrs Carol Skewes
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Dear Mrs Skewes

Short inspection of The Cornelius Vermuyden School

Following my visit to the school on 27 November 2018 with Kim Pigram, 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 the school was judged to be good in 2015.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Together with the senior team, you have led the school with determination and ambition for all pupils to achieve their potential. While there is much to celebrate, you acknowledge that the school is not yet where you want it to be. Leaders have accurately identified the things that are working well and the aspects of provision that need to improve. You know that pupils have not made consistently strong progress, for example in science, history and music.

Against the national measure of eight GCSE subjects, pupils' progress improved in 2017, but dipped to below the national average in 2018. While you and other senior leaders have taken swift action to raise standards, you know that there is more to do to ensure that all pupil groups, including the most able pupils, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make the progress they should.

The leadership team has accurately identified the improvement priorities for the school. For example, at the previous inspection in May 2015, you were asked to improve aspects of the quality of teaching to ensure that all pupils work with a sustained focus and that all groups, including the most able pupils, are challenged consistently to achieve well. Consequently, you strengthened middle leaders' role in improving the performance of pupils in their subjects and so increased their

contribution to whole-school improvement. A comprehensive programme of lesson observations was introduced, alongside changes to the school's marking and feedback policy. Your leadership team is continuing to review these systems to ensure that they are effective in improving the consistency of the quality of teaching across subjects. Work is still in progress to ensure that the school's continuing professional development opportunities for teachers are tailored to meet their individual needs.

You have introduced curriculum changes aimed at improving outcomes for all pupil groups. We discussed how the revised model is still evolving after the removal of courses such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). These changes are beginning to ensure that pupils make choices that are more consistently well matched to their abilities. More pupils are studying a modern foreign language this year. The proportion of pupils entered for the English Baccalaureate suite of qualifications will increase significantly in summer 2019. New courses have recently been introduced. You and your team are working to ensure that provision for pupils with SEND is suitably challenging and routinely enables them to achieve well.

The school is a growing community. It is regularly oversubscribed. You are continuing the work to improve communications with parents and carers, a point for improvement at the previous inspection. You know that while most parents have a positive view of the work of the school, this is still not universally the case. Appropriately, this remains a priority in your development planning.

The leadership team has sustained a strong focus on pupils' personal development. Most of the pupils whom inspectors spoke with during the inspection adopted mature attitudes to learning. They were confident and often very articulate. Many of them said that they were proud to be part of the school. The Year 11 pupils that I met with represented excellent role models for their peers.

Most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school at break- and lunchtimes. Pupils' overall attendance is around the national average. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and of pupils with SEND is often much lower, especially in the older year groups.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that a strong culture of safeguarding is well established across the school. Staff training is up to date. Your team knows the signs to look out for that might indicate a pupil is at risk of harm. The required checks on the suitability of staff to work at the school meet statutory requirements. An omission in the single central record, which logs these checks, was corrected during the inspection. Child protection records are appropriately detailed, with relevant chronologies. However, they are not always as consistent as they could be in the way that the information is recorded.

Pupils say that they feel safe and know whom to go to if they have a concern. They told inspectors that while bullying does happen, teachers take suitable action to deal

with it. However, not all parents hold the same view. Leaders are working to improve these perceptions and to ensure that parents are well informed about how their concerns are managed.

Inspection findings

- In considering my first line of enquiry, we looked at how well leaders' curriculum intentions are supporting pupils to achieve their full potential. The core values of 'respect, resilience and responsibility' are at the heart of day-to-day life in the school. Pupils typically develop good personal and social skills, readily taking on age-appropriate leadership roles.
- Performance information for the end of key stage 4 in 2018 showed that pupils' progress scores fell below the national average. Regular checks on the quality of teaching are helping to secure greater consistency with a focus on improving outcomes this year. Nevertheless, you and your leaders know that you have more work to do to ensure that all groups of pupils, including the most able and the most vulnerable, achieve as well as they should.
- This led us to my next line of enquiry, which focused on the effectiveness of provision and support for vulnerable groups, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND.
- Inspectors noted elements of strong provision and support for some of the most vulnerable pupils. In these cases, well-considered timetabling, access to relevant qualifications (including in English and mathematics), and effective careers information, advice and guidance were in place. However, the quality of provision is too variable across groups and for individual pupils.
- Leaders' expectations for some pupils with SEND are too low, including for the small number of pupils with SEND who attend part-time alternative education provision away from the school site. The school's systems for monitoring the quality of this group's overall educational experience are not sharp enough. Leadership arrangements lack clarity in identifying discrete lines of accountability. This is of concern when pupils are not programmed to attend the part-time placement away from the school.
- Disadvantaged pupils are not making enough progress. This is because provision is not matched precisely enough to meet their needs. Leaders account for pupil premium spending appropriately in their reviews. However, the information is not analysed in sufficient detail to check that the actions taken are effective in bridging the barriers to learning, such as poor attendance.
- Pupils' overall attendance is currently around the national average, but much lower for some vulnerable groups. For example, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are regularly absent from school is too high. This is especially so for disadvantaged pupils in key stage 4.
- While the school gathers a wealth of information about pupils' attendance in a range of ways, the analysis of this information lacks depth. Consequently, leaders do not have the tools they need to help them begin to identify the root causes so

that they can start to plan well-informed strategies to deal with any shortfalls.

- My next line of enquiry looked at the difference the monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment is making to pupils' experience in lessons across the school. School leaders explained to me how revised systems allow for more frequent observations and reviews of pupils' work. Middle leaders said that they feel more involved and are increasingly accountable for the quality of work in their subjects and areas of responsibility.
- During inspectors' observations with senior leaders, pupils were mostly getting on with their work. Relationships between pupils and teachers were typically productive and conducive to learning. The level of challenge to meet the needs of higher ability pupils across lessons was more variable. In some science lessons, pupils did not have a clear understanding of why they were completing activities, or how these fitted in with previous work.
- In our follow-up discussions, your senior leaders' own evaluations of the teaching seen were broadly consistent with inspectors' findings. Nevertheless, the records they shared about previous checks tended to focus on teachers' actions rather than the difference teaching is making to pupils' learning over time. This can restrict leaders' ability to focus sharply on the precise professional development that individual teachers need to help them to continue to improve their practice.
- My final line of enquiry looked at how effectively you and other school leaders are improving your communications with parents. In this context, inspectors also considered the concerns that parents had raised previously about the behaviour of a minority of pupils.
- You explained to me how you are working to keep parents regularly updated. Information is routinely shared through the school's impressive website. A parents' focus group is in place. Typically, pupils and staff feel that most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. This was consistent with inspectors' observations during the inspection day.
- The school's complaints procedure is clear and available to parents should they wish to formally raise a concern. Governors are fully aware of their important role in this process. Recent local authority reviews indicate that the school takes appropriate action when issues are raised.
- Although behaviour across the school is typically good, inspectors noted the relatively high number of instances in which pupils were referred to the school's internal exclusion facility. While the reasons to support the referrals are clearly tracked, leaders have yet to complete a detailed analysis of the underlying factors influencing these decisions. This means that they do not have the information they need to systematically target the changes necessary to bring about rapid improvement.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the curriculum is routinely well matched to pupils' learning needs, including for pupils with SEND
- lines of accountability for monitoring the progress of pupils with SEND are clear, especially for those educated away from the school site
- leaders' evaluations of teaching are more consistently focused on pupils' progress, so that all groups, including the most able, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND, achieve as well as they should
- the elements of good practice that exist in teaching and learning are routinely shared, and teachers' professional development is suitably targeted to meet their individual needs
- the incidents of internal exclusion and the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school are reduced by analysing all the available information to identify trends and plan actions for further improvement
- pupil premium spending is evaluated in sufficient depth to identify the strategies that are making the most difference to pupils' progress and the things that need to change
- they continue their efforts to improve communications with parents, especially with those who are dissatisfied with certain aspects of the school's work.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with senior and middle leaders, teaching staff and representatives of the governing body, including the chair of governors. They observed pupils as they worked in lessons, and they looked at their books. All the observations were carried out jointly with a member of the leadership team. The lead inspector listened to a small group of Year 7 pupils reading.

Inspectors also spoke with pupils in meetings, as well as informally during breaks and as they moved around the school. They looked at a range of documents, including information about governance, safeguarding, pupils' attendance and behaviour, and the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans.

In addition, they considered the views that staff, pupils and parents expressed in their responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires. They also took account of the parents' free-text comments received on the day of the inspection.