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Mr Chris Harris
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Harris

Short inspection of Larkmead School

Following my visit to the school on 15 January 2019 with Ross Macdonald, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in February 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your approach to leadership is characterised by your principled and determined pursuit of high standards in all areas of school life. The stimulating and caring ethos in the school enables pupils to make strong progress and achieve well. You balance effectively your drive for excellence with the well-being of staff and pupils. Therefore, staff at your inclusive school trust and respect you and the leadership team. Morale is high and everyone at the school shares your determination to provide the best for each pupil. However, you and your leadership team are not complacent, and you are implementing plans to help pupils achieve even greater success.

Pupils behave very well at the school. They are kind and respectful towards each other and their teachers. In lessons, we saw pupils working hard and making articulate contributions to class discussions. Pupils respond positively to their teachers' regular feedback. The work inspectors saw in pupils' books is presented with care and is of a high standard. Pupils are proud of their school and told inspectors that they enjoy the wide range of activities and clubs on offer. You are rightly proud of recently retaining the Arts Mark Gold Award. Virtually all pupils attend regularly, and leaders are tenacious in supporting the few pupils whose attendance needs to improve.

Pupils' well-being and personal development, including their mental health, have a high priority and are very well catered for at your school. Comprehensive careers

education helps pupils make wise decisions for their future. You work effectively with local independent schools to enhance and extend pupils' experiences, for example through joint debating and careers events. One pupil, voicing the opinion of a group of pupils, said, 'Teachers are comforting, always available to help and want you to do well in exams.'

Leaders use meticulous systems to assess and track pupils' progress. This ensures that any pupil at risk of falling behind is quickly spotted. A wide range of effective additional help is then provided to help pupils who need to catch up. For example, if pupils need help with reading, they are given extra help until their reading matches the strong reading skills of other pupils at the school. As a result of this, and other examples of focused support, pupils who arrive with poor skills in English and mathematics now make the same strong progress as other pupils at the school.

Heads of subject and pastoral leaders have developed a relatively new whole-school initiative to motivate pupils and promote effective learning. This has involved developing teachers' ability to improve pupils' confidence in tackling challenging work and celebrating pupils' successes more frequently. During the inspection, we saw evidence that supports your evaluation that the approach is beginning to accelerate pupils' progress, particularly the progress of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

You have developed effective systems to monitor the quality of teaching and check how well it contributes to strong progress. As a result, you, together with senior leaders and governors, have an accurate view of the school's many strengths and where improvement is possible. For example, you know that most pupils continue to make strong progress in English, mathematics, science and humanities subjects. You also recognise where further improvements can be made, such as helping pupils make more rapid progress in sports studies and computer science.

The sixth form is led strongly, providing an inclusive and encouraging environment where students make rapid progress. Leaders work effectively with the leaders of neighbouring sixth forms to share teaching, so that students can be offered a wide range of subjects. Sixth-form students give their time freely to help young pupils, for example as reading buddies. As a result of effective academic and pastoral support, students are successfully prepared for a wide range of higher education, apprenticeships and employment.

Governors provide strong challenge and support to you and other leaders. They visit the school regularly and analyse pupils' progress thoroughly. They have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas where improvement is needed, such as in the progress of some disadvantaged pupils. Governors take a reflective and professional approach to their roles. They regularly attend relevant, up-to-date training. The local governing body and the trustees of The Vale Academy Trust work well together to support the school.

Parents and carers and pupils speak highly of the school and nearly all parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend the

school to other parents. One parent observed that, 'My child has blossomed at this school, and her confidence in her own ability to be successful has dramatically improved.'

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and meet statutory requirements. Records are detailed, up to date and of a high quality. Before appointing staff, leaders carry out all the required employment checks. All staff and governors are trained effectively in how to keep pupils safe from abuse, and sexual exploitation, and in the 'Prevent' duty. Governors regularly visit the school and meet with pupils to check that all aspects of safeguarding are effective.

A dedicated and highly skilled team of staff works with determination and sensitivity, alongside pupils, parents and external agencies, to support the more vulnerable pupils. All staff monitor pupils' welfare closely. Pupils told inspectors that staff are approachable and that they know an adult they can turn to if they have concerns.

The curriculum prepares pupils well for managing their own safety. Carefully structured activities in lessons, tutor time and assemblies support pupils' personal development effectively. Leaders are rightly planning activities to develop further the pupils' awareness of the potential dangers of radicalisation and extremism. The pupils whom inspectors spoke to have a good understanding of staying safe.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, my colleague and I focused on the following lines of enquiry: how effectively pupils are prepared for their transition to their next stage of education or training at the end of key stage 4; the progress of disadvantaged pupils, and the progress of pupils with SEND.
- Careers advice and education are a strength of the school. Pupils are helped to make choices that ensure that they are prepared for a wide range of further or higher education and training. As a result, a higher than average number of pupils transfer successfully to education or training at the end of key stage 4. Pupils who spoke to inspectors were able to explain their career plans with confidence.
- Leaders have planned a curriculum that prepares pupils effectively for their next steps. For example, leaders have worked to widen pupils' career choices by increasing the number of pupils studying a modern foreign language. Leaders have improved the teaching of modern foreign languages in Year 7 and Year 8, so that approximately half of pupils now choose to study a language at GCSE.
- The pupil premium grant is used wisely to support the academic and personal development of disadvantaged pupils. You find out from leaders in primary schools about the needs of disadvantaged pupils before they join the school. As a result, teachers can plan to provide effective help for disadvantaged pupils as

soon as they start at your school. The progress of disadvantaged pupils is tracked regularly, and teachers give effective, appropriate help if a pupil's progress slows. Consequently, leaders' current credible assessment information and the work we saw in lessons show that the progress of the majority of disadvantaged pupils is now sound. However, a few disadvantaged pupils whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable have weak attendance and make limited progress. Your determined efforts to improve their academic progress and attendance are yet to be realised.

- Leaders ensure that pupils with SEND are given prompt and effective help. Teachers make good use of the detailed information they are given about these pupils to plan effectively for pupils of different needs and aptitudes. As a result, most of these pupils now make strong progress and transfer successfully to the next steps in their education or training at the end of key stage 4.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- current investment in improving pupils' attitudes to learning results in the progress of all pupils continuing to accelerate
- teachers continue to improve the support given to the small group of pupils whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable, so that their achievement and attendance improve.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Turner
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, leaders, governors, representatives of the multi-academy trust, and staff, and spoke to groups of pupils, both formally and informally. We visited lessons to observe pupils' learning, accompanied by senior leaders, and looked at the quality of work in pupils' books. My colleagues and I observed pupils at breaktime and lunchtime. We scrutinised documents about safeguarding, attendance, current pupils' progress and governors' work. The outcomes of a pupil questionnaire, the staff survey and 69 responses to the Ofsted online survey,

Parent View, were also considered.