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Jill Palmer
Principal
Meadowfield School
Swanstree Avenue
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Kent
ME10 4NL

Dear Ms Palmer

No formal designation inspection of Meadowfield School

Following my visit with Shaun Jarvis, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 12 May 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for no formal designation (NFD) inspections. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding and welfare arrangements, the effectiveness of leadership and management (including governance) and the school's effectiveness in meeting individual pupils' needs, as concerns had been raised with Ofsted.

We do not give graded judgements on NFD inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but where no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a section 5 inspection and will be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the NFD inspection to be a section 5 inspection immediately.

Evidence

We scrutinised the single central register and a wide range of other documents relating to safeguarding, welfare and child protection arrangements. We met with the principal, other members of the senior management team, groups of staff and five members of the governing body. We held telephone conversations with representatives of the local authority, and we talked to pupils informally as we walked around the school and visited lessons.

We scrutinised education, health and care (EHC) plans, annual review documents, individual healthcare plans, individual provision plans, learning passports, pupils'

well-being plans, positive handling records, minutes of governing body meetings, reports from external reviews of safeguarding and governance, records relating to complaints, and correspondence from parents and carers. We held telephone calls with a small group of parents. We considered 28 responses to Ofsted's online Parent View survey. We also considered 144 responses to our confidential staff questionnaire.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

The number of pupils on roll has increased to 358 since the previous section 5 inspection in November 2014. Just under 90% of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is below the national average. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils entitled to free school meals is higher than the national average. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and have EHC plans. There is a high level of mobility, with pupils joining and leaving the school at different times. The leadership team has remained stable, but there has been a considerable turnover of other staff since the previous inspection, including during the current academic year. There have been long-term vacancies on the governing body. The school is part of the Kent Special Educational Needs Trust and works closely with other special schools in Kent.

Main findings

Leaders and staff are determined that Meadowfield is a school where pupils thrive. Leaders know that this can only be achieved if pupils feel safe and well cared for, and if staffing is stable. Relationships between staff and pupils are generally excellent. Permanent staff know their pupils very well. Staff treat each pupil as an individual and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Staff turnover and absence have been a cause of anxiety for some parents and staff. Leaders recognise the need to do all they can to ensure that the school is fully staffed with a stable workforce.

A culture of care and attention among leaders and staff leads to a calm and purposeful environment. The large school site is safe and secure. Leaders understand the need for vigilance by all adults, at all times, to ensure that a high level of safety is maintained. Very occasionally, risks are missed. Examples of concerns shared with inspectors included reports of door codes becoming known to pupils and resources not being safely stored. Evidence indicated that, once reported, concerns are dealt with quickly.

The school's single central register shows that appropriate checks are carried out on all staff and volunteers. Leaders and governors regularly check the single central register to ensure completeness and accuracy. A suitable number and range of staff are trained in safer recruitment, and guidance is followed. For example, references for new staff are obtained and checked before offers of employment are made. Reception staff have well-established routines in place for visitors. In addition to offering a warm welcome, reception staff record visitors' details on arrival, check their identification and share the school's safeguarding information with them.

The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) acts with credibility, compassion and decisiveness. Using his wide knowledge, the DSL maintains effective oversight of communication, training and record-keeping relating to safeguarding. He is ably supported in his role by a team of deputies, and welfare and medical staff. All staff receive regular safeguarding training and updates and have access to online training. This ensures that their knowledge is kept updated. Staff recognise when pupils may be suffering or may be at risk of harm. Staff know how to raise concerns when they are worried about pupils, and do so.

Clear roles and responsibilities within the safeguarding team mean that each concern is dealt with quickly and appropriately. Occasionally, concerns need to be referred to other agencies. When this happens, leaders keep a close eye on referrals, ensure that matters are followed up, and work willingly with experts from other agencies.

The school's well-being staff provide a whole host of additional support to pupils and their families. This includes helping families access the services they need, providing mental health support and being a point of contact for those who just need to talk. Leaders are rightly proud of this work and are keen to develop it further. As a result of the work led by the safeguarding and well-being teams, pupils and their families usually get the help and support they need in a timely manner.

Leaders and staff have a detailed understanding of each pupil's needs, as described in their EHC plans. Annual reviews provide the opportunity to discuss what is working well, or less well, and to identify any changes that are needed to pupils' provision. Individual provision plans clearly detail what staff need to do to support pupils to meet their targets. Class teachers review and update these plans at key points during the year. Pupils who need medication, or who have personal care needs, have plans in place so that staff know what they need to do and when. Most pupils have a 'My Learning Passport' that teachers send home to parents each week. This enables parents to check how their child is progressing towards their targets.

At times, some pupils struggle to manage their behaviour. Pupils have their own well-being plans that help staff to respond to pupils' behaviour in a highly personalised way. Many staff are expert in managing incidents of challenging behaviour and use a range of positive strategies to de-escalate a situation and to re-

engage pupils in their learning. Examples of successful approaches include 'change of place' and 'change of face'. Changing the adult who is supporting the pupil or moving to a different environment can often be enough to alleviate anxiety and restore positive behaviour.

During the inspection, inspectors visited lessons across the school. Pupils who spoke to inspectors said that they are happy at Meadowfield and they enjoy the principal's dogs being part of their school! Pupils explained that they have a trusted adult they can talk to if they are worried about something. One pupil spoke about the different risks involved when using the internet and said he would tell a teacher if he were worried about anything online.

Restorative approaches are used by staff to help pupils in cases of dispute with one another. The school's personal, social and health education curriculum provides plenty of opportunities to learn about different relationships and ways to resolve conflict. Discussions about friendships and behaving kindly happen frequently. Staff are alert to bullying and take thoughtful action to support both the perpetrator and victim when such behaviour occurs.

Staff provide a high level of support and encouragement to one another. Inspectors heard about the positive atmosphere, advice and teamwork in the different coloured corridors. On the whole, staff feel well supported by leaders. As one member of staff commented: 'Leaders are always there to offer advice or listen to the needs of their staff.' However, a small minority of staff reported feeling unsupported with managing pupils' behaviour or were worried about organisational matters such as class changes and workload. Leaders are keen to work with staff to explore how they can offer better support, in addition to the welfare support package already introduced.

Most parents who responded to Ofsted's Parent View survey or who spoke to inspectors were positive about the school. For example, one parent commented: 'For our family, Meadowfield is not just a great school, it is an extension of our family.' Another said: 'My child feels safe at Meadowfield and has a strong sense of belonging.'

A small minority of parents expressed a range of concerns, including anxiousness about pupils' safety and well-being and a lack of communication and/or complaint resolution from the school. Complaints records scrutinised by inspectors revealed detailed records and complaints being handled appropriately and in accordance with the school policy. Inspectors saw many examples of positive communication between the school and parents, including correspondence that urged parents to get in touch with any questions, concerns or suggestions. However, some parents expressed dissatisfaction with communication from the school. It was also noted that the parent forum had ceased to operate.

The governing body has been strengthened recently. An external review has helped governors develop a plan to distribute responsibility in a way that will better support school improvement. A new governor, not previously associated with the school, has been recruited to provide additional scrutiny to safeguarding. Governors have a sound understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development, as demonstrated by comprehensive minutes of governing body meetings. Clear actions are agreed at governing body meetings and these actions are followed up and reported on at subsequent meetings. These actions help leaders to focus their attention on what they need to do to improve the school further.

External support

Leaders work collaboratively with local authority officers and are accepting of help. A recent review provided governors with recommendations about how they could improve their work. These recommendations are being followed. The local authority has also recently visited the school to conduct a safeguarding audit. The audit identified no significant concerns. At the time of this inspection, a further visit from the local authority to check on actions and progress against the audit was imminent. Local authority officers have provided helpful and effective guidance.

Priorities for further improvement

- Review and strengthen communication, so that parents and staff feel able to share ideas and express concerns, and feel confident that senior leaders and governors will listen and respond.
- Take all possible steps to ensure that any remaining governor and staff vacancies are filled in order to support the smooth running of the school on a day-to-day basis.

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

Yours sincerely

Hilary Macdonald
Her Majesty's Inspector