Inspection of a good school: Larkmead School

Faringdon Road, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 1RF

Inspection dates: 26 and 27 March 2024

Outcome

Larkmead School continues to be a good school.

The headteacher is Jonathan Dennett. This school is part of Vale Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Richard Evans, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Beth Taylor.

What is it like to attend this school?

This school is a very happy and inclusive place because, as one parent said, pupils 'are at the heart of what Larkmead does'. Consequently, pupils are polite and respectful with staff and each other. Pupils feel safe and 'seen' here. They are very clear that the school does not tolerate bullying or prejudicial behaviour. They know who to go to for help and have confidence that the school will listen and address any concerns. The school's caring ethos ensures it maintains its high expectations, both academically and personally, while also continuing to provide strong support to pupils.

Pupils benefit from strong personal development. A wide range of extra-curricular activities bring the community together through shared interests and spaces. The school is also aspirational for all pupils academically. Recent curriculum developments are starting to have a positive impact on current pupils' achievement, most of whom are working to increasingly higher standards and are proud of their work. This includes pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). However, these developments are not yet reflected in published outcomes, particularly for more disadvantaged pupils.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Pupils study an ambitious curriculum in all key stages and can follow subjects through from Year 7 to 13 if they wish. Developments in key stage 3 means that, increasingly, more pupils are taking the suite of GCSE subjects included in the English Baccalaureate. Sixth-form students particularly appreciate the open and inclusive approach to A-level courses options. Most pupils study alongside their peers, with a small number following appropriately adapted programmes. The school provides staff with information about any pupils' additional needs. Most teachers use this effectively to adapt and target approaches

in lessons, particularly for those with SEND and who speak English as an additional language. However, they are not always as clear how to support pupils who have gaps in their learning because of lower rates of attendance, including some disadvantaged pupils.

Staff have identified and sequenced important subject knowledge to help prepare pupils for the next phase of learning. Most teachers introduce new content well and select activities effectively. This allows pupils to embed knowledge gradually. This has remained a focus during recent periods of remote learning. In key stage 4 and in the sixth form, pupils increasingly and effectively draw on their prior learning to help them with more sophisticated tasks. Some teachers do not check effectively enough the depth of pupils' understanding. Sometimes, especially lower down the school, they do not adjust their approaches to help pupils to apply their learning to increasingly complex tasks precisely and independently.

There is a sharp focus on reading, especially for pupils who are not yet fluent readers. Staff identify where pupils have gaps and target extra support accordingly. These pupils make strong progress. The wider literacy strategy and robust staff training to accompany it are having a positive impact on pupils' reading across the curriculum.

Staff manage behaviour very effectively, through clear expectations and positive relationships with pupils. Most pupils behave extremely well, both in lessons and during social time. Sixth-form students are excellent role models. However, a small number of pupils find meeting expectations challenging. Consequently, the school has increased and integrated its pastoral and inclusion teams, to further strengthen how it works with pupils and families. This has already had a marked impact on behaviour, especially where pupils have more complex social and behavioural needs. Improvements in attendance are also emerging, but staff acknowledge there is still more to do here, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

The school's excellent personal development programme covers required content but also responds to issues of broader importance, for example linked to current affairs. Pupils in all years have an age-appropriate understanding of healthy relationships and how to stay safe, including online. They learn about equality and are proud of their welcoming school community. Careers provision is impressive. Pupils benefit from regular careers and employability events and talks, often involving their wide range of partners from the world of work, education and training. Consequently, pupils are very well prepared for their next steps. As with all areas of the school's work, staff ensure that all personal development and careers activities are fully inclusive.

The trust provides strong support and challenge for the school, not least linked to safeguarding. Staff value the access they have to high-quality and collaborative professional development. The school and trust are mindful of colleagues' workload and well-being in their decision-making. This is recognised by staff, and they are extremely proud to work at the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some teachers do not systematically check all pupils' accuracy and depth of understanding to a high enough level. Consequently, some pupils cannot draw on the full range of what they have learned and apply it fluently, especially in key stage 3. The school should continue to support teachers to refine their practice so they can accurately identify what pupils know and can do and adapt their teaching accordingly.
- Some pupils' attendance is not yet high enough. This means that these pupils do not benefit from all that the school has to offer and that they do not achieve as well as they could. The school should continue to embed its culture of high attendance so that the strategies which it has put in place support all pupils to attend regularly and keep up with their work, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in February 2015.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use Ofsted Parent View to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further guidance on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for published performance information about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the definition of children in need of help and

protection; pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's pupil premium funding (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	143890
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10322028
Type of school	Secondary Comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	929
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	128
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Beth Taylor
CEO of trust	Richard Evans
Headteacher	Jonathan Dennett
Website	www.larkmead-school.com
Dates of previous inspection	15 January 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of Vale Academy Trust.
- The school currently uses four registered alternative providers and eleven unregistered providers.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior leaders of the school and trust leaders. The lead inspector held meetings with the chair of the board of trustees, trustees and governors.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, history and design and technology. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors considered a range of documentation provided by the school. This included the school's self-evaluation, published information about pupils' performance and minutes of trustees' and governors' meetings.
- Inspectors spoke to a wide range of pupils and observed their behaviour in lessons and at social times.
- Inspectors considered responses to Ofsted Parent View questionnaire, including free-text responses. They also took account of the responses to the staff and pupil surveys and gathered the views of parents, staff and pupils throughout the inspection.

Inspection team

Mary Davies, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Andy Johnson	Ofsted Inspector

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