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Joe Creswick
Principal
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Dear Mr Creswick

Short inspection of Ivel Valley School

Following my visit to the school on 2 May 2018 with Teresa Skeggs, 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 the school was judged to be good in September 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

Pupils are happy, developing confidence and keen to talk about their learning. From the youngest children in the early years through to the oldest students in the sixth form, all are eager to come to school. They enjoy the array of activities that they get to access in the curriculum, including the sporting activities, and the trips and visits that they go on. Pupils told inspectors that they felt very well looked after by adults, and look forward to their lessons with their 'nice' teachers.

The areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been addressed successfully over time. A number of effective strategies are improving writing across the school. Equally, the school has developed assessment, and its accuracy, with rigour.

Since your appointment as principal in September 2017, you have brought a renewed energy to school improvement. You lead with a clear vision for the school: that every child should access the best provision and should be well supported to achieve the very best outcomes. You, ably supported by your head of school, make sure that there is equal emphasis on pupils' learning and academic progress and on their personal and social development.

Your calm and quiet determination to improve the school further is evident. You have also strengthened your senior and middle leadership teams in line with the

school's priorities for improvement. You and the teams have created a strong leadership capacity that continues to improve the quality of provision in the school.

You are well supported by governors and staff. You have invested time and money in staff training and development. Most staff feel listened to, valued and enthusiastic about their own development. Governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. They are constantly looking for ways to improve, as shown by their recent re-organisation to focus on the school's priorities more precisely.

Despite many strengths, there are areas for improvement in the school's provision. In particular, you have identified that lessons are not yet developing pupils' communication and collaborative-learning skills as fully as they could. In line with this, we also discussed the challenges to getting pupils, especially the most able, ready for higher-level provision when they leave you. This is an area that we agreed needs further development.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have established a strong culture of safeguarding across the school. You have worked diligently since you arrived to ensure that all appropriate checks are made on the staff that you employ. Staff receive regular safeguarding training and know what to do if they have a concern about a pupil. You work closely with other external professionals to ensure that pupils get all the support they need. Child protection records are well kept and are of high quality.

Pupils are well supported and cared for, including those with very specific and complex medical needs. Pupils are well supervised from when they first arrive in the morning to when they leave at the end of the day. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, in an age- and ability-appropriate way. Almost all pupils, parents and carers feel that pupils are safe and well cared for. You routinely review detailed behaviour records to constantly improve your support of individual pupils.

Leaders and staff work hard to make sure that all pupils attend school regularly. When pupils' attendance is affected by unavoidable absences linked to medical needs, leaders ensure that pupils are well supported to catch up when they return to school. Equally, leaders' actions to work with individual pupils and their families to improve attendance have considerably reduced the school's overall persistent absence figure this year.

Inspection findings

- We first reviewed the progress that pupils are making in the school. This is because published information does not give a clear picture of standards in the school from pupils' varied starting points.
- Leaders have focused on refining the way that teachers introduce learning to pupils in lessons so that pupils understand what they are learning and why. Teachers communicate expertly with all pupils, despite their various learning

difficulties. A wide range of assistive technology and communications is used by teachers to ensure that pupils are clear on their timetables and personal learning during lessons. For example, picture boards, coloured signs, iPad applications and hand-gesture signs are all used to guide and support pupils' learning within the classroom.

- Pupils across the key stages typically made good progress from their starting points over time. Adults know pupils well and work together seamlessly to meet pupils' learning and developmental needs as lessons go on. Teachers discuss the progress of individual pupils with you, in order to decide whether interventions may be needed to make sure that they continue to move forward.
- Disadvantaged pupils, including some of the most able, are well supported. Almost all disadvantaged pupils made strong progress from their starting points in the last academic year. Most notably, leaders use the additional funding that they receive insightfully, to support the bespoke needs of individual pupils.
- Leaders are constantly refining the assessment systems and processes to ensure that staff are accurate in their assessment of pupils' achievements. Leaders have also introduced moderation with a range of other schools. This has enabled them to compare and benchmark Ivel Valley against other schools.
- Your central priority this year has been to support pupils with the most complex needs to develop independent communication more effectively. Most staff are confident in the use of signing and symbol support to help pupils develop their own communication skills. However, never resting on your laurels, you have also invested in more complex communication hardware. You are adamant that these resources remain with pupils both in and out of school so that they fully develop their own 'voice' in their everyday lives. Your focus, as always, is about bringing dignity and independence to your pupils.
- Despite the clear strengths in teaching, learning and assessment, we identified that adults are not yet ensuring that they support pupils to develop collaborative and communication skills with one another. Equally, there are staff who are not as confident in using these newer communication tools with pupils.
- We also reviewed the curriculum provision for pupils in the school. Leaders are ensuring that pupils are accessing a broad range of learning opportunities. Pupils throughout the inspection proudly showed their learning, from the key stage 1 pupils using sensory activities to explore 'the sea', to key stage 2 pupils presenting their work on the life cycle of a frog, to key stage 5 students discussing what they have learned on the travel training programme.
- Changes to the curriculum are providing pupils with wider opportunities to gain accreditation and qualifications throughout Years 11 to 14, including entry levels, functional skills, vocational qualifications and the Duke of Edinburgh award. Leaders are always looking to provide even more personalised qualifications for pupils who show an interest in areas such as horticulture or farming.
- You acknowledge that long-term planning for pupils up to the age of 25 is an ongoing challenge. You support pupils well to transition into a post-16 or post-18 destination. However, you are not yet challenging one another, nor the local authority, at each review point on whether these pathways are linked closely

enough to pupils' long-term career and life goals. In particular, are the most able pupils accessing courses and accreditation as they transition across key stages and into adulthood that are aspirational enough for them?

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they embed pupils' opportunities to communicate and collaborate together, further enhancing pupils' independent life skills
- they work with the local authority to ensure that the most able pupils access accreditation, qualifications, guidance and pathways that are aspirational and support them precisely to achieve their long-term education, training and employment goals.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynda Walker

Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, the head of school, and senior leaders. We also met formally with the chair of governors. Inspectors visited an array of lessons across the sites. We were accompanied by members of the senior leadership team. We looked at pupils' work while we were in those lessons. We took account of 13 pupil responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire, 17 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents Parent View, and 51 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. We reviewed a range of school documentation, including information related to safeguarding and pupils' progress.