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7 September 2017

Mr William Deighan
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Dear Mr Deighan

Short inspection of Varndean School

Following my visit to the school on 5 July 2017 with Jon Whitcombe, 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 school was judged to be good in July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Many aspects of school life have moved into a higher gear, from achievement to behaviour, and pastoral care to the curriculum. As a member of staff wrote, 'It has come on an incredible journey since the last inspection.' Initiatives that started a few years ago have blossomed, and over 90% of staff are proud to work at the school.

Since the last inspection, you have strengthened the quality of teaching in the school. This has resulted in improved progress for pupils in all years and in better GCSE examination results. Pupils now feel confident about how to improve their work, and typically behave well and work hard in lessons. The percentage of pupils attaining good grades in GCSE English and mathematics examinations in 2016 was just above average. Results were convincingly above average in several curriculum areas, such as technology and computer subjects, Spanish, sports and media studies. You and senior leaders are fully aware that a few subjects and groups had disappointing results. Tackling the underlying factors started early this year.

Under your leadership, your deputy headteachers and other members of the senior leadership team have become increasingly effective. You insist on high standards of teaching throughout the school. You make sure that teachers' skills are constantly improved by providing relevant and useful training sessions and by visiting and

working with other schools to share best practice. You have appointed non-teaching staff and teaching assistants who contribute much to pupils' well-being and progress. You welcome probing and challenging questions from your experienced and wise governors and regularly seek external advice to verify procedures and standards.

A contributory factor to pupils feeling safe, happy and belonging is the successful establishment of four 'small schools'. In these, teaching and non-teaching staff know each pupil really well, so that small and large concerns are dealt with swiftly. Many parents complimented the school, writing, for example, 'I love the fact that Varndean is a caring, inclusive and friendly school.'

Pupils are extremely well prepared for their transition towards sixth-form studies and beyond through activities such as 'learning for life' and philosophy lessons. Pupils discuss many aspects of British values and often focus on the news in form time. They answer questions, written by a member of staff, which require them to reflect and learn much about what is happening in the world. One parent summed up exactly the atmosphere and strengths that the inspectors noticed, writing that there is 'a strong ethos of developing the whole person, encouraging kindness, pupils valuing themselves and others and being socially aware and connected to their local community'.

Pupils confirmed that behaviour has improved since the previous inspection. This has generated a reduction in exclusions and improved attendance – an aspect for improvement in the previous report. Your school has the best attendance in the local authority, but you are not complacent and staff continue to work hard to raise attendance further.

The school's website, rightly, describes your curriculum as 'modern and diverse'. You and governors continue to offer a very wide range of subjects. This means that pupils in all years enjoy experiencing creative and artistic subjects. An above-average proportion of them enter such subjects at GCSE and achieve very well.

Year 7 pupils all learn a musical instrument. In addition, after taster sessions of 16 options, including creative writing and outdoor leadership, they choose one which they study for an afternoon a week. When I visited some of these sessions, it was clear that pupils were thoroughly absorbed and confident to work independently. This was an aspect of learning requiring improvement in the previous inspection.

Many parents, rightly, complimented the considerable breadth of extra-curricular activities and trips, particularly the Duke of Edinburgh Awards. The school has the largest number of pupils achieving these awards in the South East. Parents also referred to the 'brilliant music', 'fantastic drama', 'amazing library staff', 'energetic sport' and 'thought-provoking philosophy'. It is not surprising that the ethos of the school reflects its excellent provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils contribute much to the local community and generously raise funds for charities.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's safeguarding policy is up to date and comprehensive. Posters around the school display the name of the designated safeguarding lead whom pupils can contact. Pupils are regularly advised about the dangers of social media.

New members of staff receive appropriate induction in the school's safeguarding procedures prior to attending the training and updates that all staff receive regularly. Recently, staff have been brought up to date on recognising the signs of female genital mutilation, domestic abuse and radicalisation.

The safeguarding governor and senior designated lead liaise regularly, and the full governing body receives informative and detailed termly reports. A new child protection monitoring system effectively records details of every child about whom staff have any concerns and generates reports quickly. Case studies reveal the thorough and well-considered practical and emotional support that the school provides, particularly for children looked after and vulnerable pupils. The school employs a full-time counsellor, and safeguarding staff contact external agencies for extra support whenever needed.

Inspection findings

- Together, we explored reasons why the 2016 GCSE examination results in science and humanities subjects were not as good as those in English, mathematics and most other subjects. You explained the leadership and staffing issues and how you had addressed them this year. Your head of science, back in post in April 2016, knew exactly what steps to take to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. She was also clear that only those pupils who are confident and wish to study the three separate sciences should choose this option in the future. New leaders for geography and history are improving pupils' progress, but the enjoyment of exploring these subjects was not evident in all the lessons visited.
- We considered the evidence that Year 11 pupils had made more progress in science and the humanities by the beginning of the summer term 2017 than they had at the same time in 2016. We concluded, and you agreed, that results will not improve convincingly until 2018. These subjects continue to need support.
- We also reflected on the progress of different groups of pupils. In 2016, the majority of pupils who had special educational needs and/or disabilities did well in their GCSE examinations. Middle-attaining pupils, especially those who are disadvantaged, did not make as good progress as others. Poor attendance by a few of these pupils contributed to some of the underachievement.
- You are fully aware of the difference in outcomes between those who are disadvantaged and other pupils in the school and nationally. Any differences have diminished considerably in recent years, particularly in Years 7 to 9. The school leader who oversees provision for these pupils regularly adjusts the way in which additional funds are spent. Contributing to computer loans has been a successful initiative. This practice supports the learning of disadvantaged pupils and the

school's contact with their parents. Along with many well-targeted interventions, a team of middle leaders from all subjects now ensures that all staff know these pupils well and set them challenges which they can achieve.

- The most able pupils made sound progress overall in 2016 and above-average progress in English and modern foreign languages. You are keen to see them make more rapid progress in all subjects. The number of these pupils entering the school is going up. This reflects the increasing popularity of the school, which is now oversubscribed. Over 90% of parents would recommend the school to others. You realise that the school will have to extend its provision for the most able pupils in the future.
- During our visit, we confirmed that the curriculum as a whole, the culture of the school and the quality of pupils' personal development and well-being are still good. A combination of questionnaire responses and comments that pupils and staff made to us contributed to everything we saw. You are leading a school where these aspects of school life are especially strong and you are convincingly improving teaching and outcomes.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the support provided for middle leaders of science and the humanities continues so that pupils achieve as well in these subjects as they do in most others
- all teachers intensify their focus on middle-attaining and disadvantaged middle-attaining pupils so that they make at least as good progress as others.

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

Yours sincerely

Clare Gillies
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

My colleague and I held meetings with you, senior leaders, including the designated safeguarding lead, several subject leaders and the special educational needs coordinator. I met four governors, one of whom had recently taken over as chair, and a representative of the local authority.

Inspectors talked to pupils informally around the school and in lessons and held meetings with Years 9 and 11 pupils. Accompanied by a senior leader, we visited a range of classes in both key stages. We scrutinised documents related to

safeguarding, attendance and behaviour, current progress and allocation of additional funds. We read reviews of the school carried out by external advisers and examples of safeguarding records.

Inspectors took into account 131 staff members', 200 pupils' and 170 parents' responses to questionnaires and their written comments. Of the 152 parents who contributed to the free-text option, 30 wrote detailed comments.