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Dear Mrs Hooft

Short inspection of The Vale Academy

Following my visit to the school on 17 October 2017, 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 last inspection.

The Vale Academy has sustained high standards, alongside embedding a well-rounded, rich curriculum for all pupils. Parents are supportive of the school and appreciative of the hard work of staff. Parents commented on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, on the 'extremely approachable staff' and the 'exciting curriculum'.

Determined leadership, including that of governors, has ensured that the school's drive for improvement has not wavered. Having transitioned from a middle school to a full primary school, your vision for an exciting, innovative curriculum that meets the needs of all pupils has remained constant. This too is acknowledged by some parents. One parent stated how their child is 'excited to be going to school every day'. Your clear vision for a school that stimulates pupils' curiosity and thirst for knowledge, new skills and understanding is evident in the improvements you have made to the curriculum and to teaching and learning.

Governance at The Vale Academy is robust. The local governing board is well led and governors have clearly defined roles that enable them to regularly gather information about the school. Governors share your ambition for the success of all pupils in the school. Their regular visits to the school and involvement in the monitoring of the quality of education demonstrate their commitment to improvement. The information

they gather is used to both challenge and commend leaders on the standard of education.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Pupils are courteous, kind and empathetic to the needs of others. As a result, there is a harmonious learning environment throughout the school. Pupils are very eager to learn and supportive of each other's learning. You have ensured that pupils have access to an enriched curriculum, whereby they develop key skills, knowledge and understanding through the study of exciting topics, such as dragons in Year 2 and space in Year 5. As a result, very many pupils develop independent learning skills, alongside insightful reflections on the world they live in.

You correctly judge the teaching of writing to be a strength of the school. Strong leadership has ensured that most pupils from Nursery to Year 6 make good progress. The high expectations of staff are clear and pupils respond accordingly. The curriculum is well designed, enabling most pupils to develop key skills and culminating in above-average achievements at the end of key stage 2. You and your leadership team are alert to changes in pupils' engagement and development, and act swiftly and effectively. You have developed innovative ways in which to embed the key skills required for effective writing, such as through poetry in outdoor settings.

You and your leaders take effective action where you consider improvements are required. For example, as a result of your developments in the teaching of mathematics, outcomes at both key stages rose sharply. You and your leadership team draw effectively on both external and internal support. As a result, the teaching of mathematics is stimulating and effective. I observed pupils in a Year 6 class enthused by the different ways in which they could develop their calculations. You identified issues relating to girls' confidence with mathematics at key stage 2 and immediately established effective support. Consequently, the progress of girls has improved. As a result of your developments in the teaching of mathematics, outcomes at key stage 2 rose sharply and were significantly above the national average in 2016.

You recognise that there are still areas in which the school needs to improve. For example, you have prioritised plans to accelerate the progress of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, across the curriculum. You acknowledge that staff need to ensure that pupils receive more precise guidance to accelerate their progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils speak openly and appreciatively of the hard work of staff in keeping them safe. The Vale Academy is a safe and very happy place to learn. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe when online. Pupils also learn about road safety and the importance of care and attention when crossing the road, as many pupils walk to school. Parents stated clearly that their children were safe and well cared for at the school.

Pupils are able to define bullying and understand the different forms it can take. Pupils told me that bullying was not a common occurrence but, when it did happen, staff responded swiftly and effectively. Consequently, pupils told me that they felt safe and protected at the school. They also told me that they knew exactly where to go if they had a concern and were confident that staff would help them to resolve it.

Leaders, including governors, ensure that safeguarding procedures are robust and reviewed regularly. Records, including the checks made on adults who work at the school, are carefully and securely maintained. Inspection evidence shows that pupils who are in need of help receive timely and appropriate support. Adults are well trained in safeguarding and are vigilant. Adults follow the school's clear process for referrals, which are followed up appropriately and swiftly.

Inspection findings

- To ascertain that the school remained good, one of my lines of enquiry was how well good practice in teaching, learning and assessment was shared in order to improve outcomes for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils. You have ensured that the school maintains a strong focus on raising standards in teaching and learning across the curriculum. Through continual internal and externally provided training for all staff, you have put in place clear strategies to raise the quality of provision. As a result, pupils make good progress in all areas of the curriculum.
- Your innovative curriculum facilitates the sharing of strong, subject-specific teaching. As a consequence, I observed pupils in Year 2 making 'golden treats' for dragons by applying and developing the skills of mathematics, reading, speaking, listening and design and technology. The pupils' enthusiasm for their learning was infectious, resulting in good progress in a range of areas.
- The Shared Learning Trust has supported you and your leadership team to develop and enhance the quality of provision at the school, through both external and internal training opportunities. You have also developed a very precise system for regularly tracking and monitoring the progress of all pupils. This has allowed you to quickly and effectively provide support for pupils who may be struggling. As a result, these pupils make good progress.
- My second line of enquiry was how leaders are ensuring that the most able pupils, especially boys, make rapid progress across the curriculum. You and your leadership team have prioritised this area and have put in place plans to improve the progress of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils. For example, pupils in mathematics receive additional challenge. However, this is not consistently effective in all areas of the curriculum. Consequently, the most able pupils and the most able disadvantaged pupils do not consistently receive the challenge required to make rapid progress. Teachers' guidance in pupils' books does not consistently promote accelerated progress across the curriculum.
- I also sought to establish how well pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make progress and how staff meet their needs. Leadership of special educational needs and/or disabilities is highly effective. Leaders review and adapt provision to ensure that it is tailored to meet the needs of pupils. Learning support assistants receive regular training to ensure that they employ

the most appropriate strategies for pupils. I observed learning support assistants supporting pupils with expertise, through considered questioning. Pupils, parents and staff are involved in regular reviews of provision and in informing the creation of targets in order to ensure that they meet the needs of pupils. As a result, pupils make good progress across the curriculum, above other pupils nationally.

- My final line of enquiry was how well leaders have addressed low levels of school attendance for a group of pupils. As a result of a combination of strategies, these pupils' attendance has improved markedly. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has also improved measurably. You introduced a range of incentives for attendance, such as class rewards, prizes for 100% attendance and a range of additional prizes. You have also made school a great place to attend. Parents that I spoke to in the morning told me that their children had come on 'in leaps and bounds'. Pupils are able to flourish at the school through the exciting curriculum, the well-structured outdoor space and the strong provision of extra-curricular resources. For example, pupils visit London and the Dunstable Downs, and can participate in a range of clubs such as dance, art and tae kwon do.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers provide more additional challenge to accelerate the progress of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, across the curriculum.

I am copying this letter to the chair of governors, 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

Susan Aykin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the course of this inspection, I held meetings with you, the chief executive of the Shared Learning Trust, the executive principal, other senior and middle leaders and a group of three governors. I spoke with pupils informally in classrooms and when walking around the school site. I also met formally with a group of 17 pupils. I visited a range of classes across key stage 1 and key stage 2. I undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work in their books and folders.

Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined, along with the school's record of checks carried out on staff working at the school. A range of documents were analysed or discussed, including the school's self-evaluation and

improvement plans, documents relating to pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour, minutes of governor meetings and curriculum plans.

I considered the views of 33 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as 35 views parents expressed via the free-text service. I analysed 19 staff views expressed via the staff questionnaire.