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1 March 2019

Mr Roland Gooding  
Principal  
Valence School  
Westerham Road  
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Kent  
TN16 1QN

Dear Mr Gooding

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Valence School**

Following my visit to your school on 7 February 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school received a judgement of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspection in July 2017.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

### **Evidence**

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, your senior leadership team, a group of staff with responsibilities for specific subjects, and governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also spoke with a representative of the local authority by telephone. I toured the school with your assistant principals while lessons were taking place, meeting staff and pupils along the way. I evaluated your school improvement plan. In addition, I sampled other relevant documentation, including papers relating to governance and leaders' records of their monitoring activities.

## **Context**

Your vice principal left in December 2018 to take up a new post elsewhere. One of your assistant principals is currently on maternity leave. The remaining three assistant principals have all taken on elements of the vice principal's responsibilities, pending a new appointment. A new vice-principal role was created in January 2019 with responsibility for safeguarding and the social care aspects of the school's work. The previous head of safeguarding, who started after the last inspection, has been appointed to this new role. This vice-principal is also sharing some of the responsibilities of the vacant vice-principal post. A new English leader started in January 2019, after a prolonged period during which this post was vacant. The school is partway through a complex staffing restructure.

## **Main findings**

After a difficult period, this school is safely back on track. In the period leading up to the July 2017 inspection, leaders' rightful priority was responding swiftly and effectively to previously identified safeguarding concerns. You openly admit that during this period leaders were less focused on improving the already good quality of education. Nonetheless, extensive work to overhaul safeguarding resulted in it being judged to be effective at your previous inspection. Since then, leaders have been able to recalibrate and shift a greater focus back to improving the school's overall effectiveness.

Leaders are ambitious for the school and its pupils. Since the previous inspection, leaders have rekindled a more joined-up and coordinated approach. The strategy for improving the quality of education is tighter and more sharply focused than previously. The school improvement plan sets out clearly what leaders intend to do and when, and what they hope to achieve as a result. Leaders draw resourcefully on information from their varied checks that these improvements are on track and making the difference intended. They adjust their plans accordingly, where necessary. Leaders are keen to ensure that important strategic decisions are based soundly on evidence of what works. There is also a shared commitment that all actions will help the school move towards the agreed vision for improvement.

Indicative of your collective desire to improve the school, leaders have not focused exclusively on the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report. A redesign of the curriculum has arisen from identifying and evolving what leaders saw as the school's previously most effective work and principles. The conception of a new 'pathways' approach, designed to meet pupils' intellectual, physical, social and emotional needs, is well reasoned. It has been communicated effectively with staff. Teachers like the approach and are already noticing the benefits for pupils that it brings. You have similarly prioritised informing parents and carers about this important work.

New leadership and staffing structures have been designed with the clear purpose

of supporting the effective implementation of the new curriculum approach. A well-defined and shared overarching vision and strong communication between senior leaders provide the foundations for a coherent approach. This is balanced with the flexibility within each curriculum pathway to meet the needs of all pupils. School leaders are realistic about the work still required to complete the ongoing staffing review, as well as that required to refine and embed the new curriculum.

The nature of the school's size and type means that delegation of more traditional leadership roles beyond senior leaders is bespoke and nuanced. Those with subject responsibility feel accountable but empowered in their roles. They make sure that their plans for improving their own areas fit in with, and contribute to, the overarching priorities for improvement. An increased investment in the professional development and training for staff, including those with additional responsibilities, has been well received and boosted confidence. Systems for managing the performance of staff are in place to ensure that all play their part in the school's success. Procedures for decisions about staff's pay have been clarified and tightened.

Governance has strengthened since the previous inspection. Supported by professional clerking, governors have balanced a sharper focus on their strategic duties with being much more attentive to school improvement. Increasingly, they provide meaningful challenge by asking well-chosen questions. Their monitoring and oversight of the school's work is more systematic and thorough. Governors are more conversant with the information leaders share about pupils' progress. School leaders and governors agree that the culture now is one of openness and a shared determination to make the school the best it can be.

### **External support**

Just prior to the previous inspection, the local authority provided considerable support to help the school strengthen its safeguarding practice. A wider leadership and management review, including governance, reaffirmed what the principal already knew about important improvements that were required. The turnover in the school's improvement advisers means that ongoing support and challenge for school improvement has been disjointed, since the previous inspection. Leaders report that the school's work with a local cooperative of special schools has been invaluable in supporting improvement, by sharing expertise and best practice through collaborative working.

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 website.

Yours sincerely

Clive Dunn  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**