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Mrs Claire Edgeley
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Edgeley

Short inspection of Over Hall Community School

Following my visit to the school on 22 March 2016, 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. In your short time in post, you and your relatively new team have maintained the stability of the school and ensured that there is continuity in the progress being made. There is a clear determination and commitment to continue to improve the school. School leaders, governors and trustees recognise the strengths of the school and know exactly which aspects require further attention if improvement is to be sustained.

The school is functioning as a well-managed and safe community in which the pupils are well cared for. The parents I spoke to, and most of those who commented online, were very positive about the work of the school. They understood the challenging environment that staff are often working in and are very appreciative of their efforts. There is a great deal of importance placed on the emotional well-being of the pupils. As one parent remarked: 'Both my children have behaviour problems and struggled in their previous school. Since coming here, their behaviour is much better managed and they are able to participate much more in lessons'. Another commented that: 'There are some troubled children who cause disturbances [...] I think the school is very good at handling these situations'. You are constantly looking at ways in which you can improve the help and support that the school provides for the children in its care, especially for the small number of disturbed youngsters who require very sensitive handling. Some innovative approaches are being considered. Following much debate, and with the agreement of the governors and trustees, you purchased a young dog, Noah, who is currently

being trained to provide therapeutic respite and help to control outbursts of aggressive or violent behaviour.

Pupils whom I talked to were unanimous in their opinion that the school was improving and they felt that many aspects were better than they were a few years ago. Behaviour has improved and there is less disruption in lessons and around the school.

There is clear evidence to show that the school has addressed the weaknesses identified at the time of the previous inspection, before the school converted to become an academy. Year-on-year improvement has seen standards rise by the time pupils leave school in Year 6, especially in reading and mathematics. Attainment at the end of key stage 1 has also improved, but you recognise that this still needs to be better. You recognise that this can be achieved by improving the quality of teaching as well as by making more effective use of assessment information to identify those pupils in danger of falling behind and supporting them through interventions.

Your approach to improve pupils' punctuality and to promote more regular attendance has resulted in some improvement. There are good reward systems in place for attendance. These include gold bars, badges, silver stickers and 'dojos' (online class messaging). There is currently a great deal of competition between individuals and classes, which has resulted in a rise in attendance. However, poorer attendance from a number of hard-to-reach families means that it remains below the national average.

Staff morale is high, as evidenced by the returns from the staff questionnaire. You have engendered a positive atmosphere of teamwork and mutual support between teachers and support staff and you are developing very positive relationships with most parents. This was summarised very succinctly by one member of staff who wrote: 'The school has a lovely, calm, caring environment and supports all parents and pupils, some with very challenging family lives, and tries to promote good family values. I believe all staff, pupils and parents are listened to and supported'.

The school environment is clean, bright and welcoming. Displays are vibrant and reinforce the messages at the heart of the school, which promote well-being. Words such as respect, safety, ownership, trust, enjoyment and achievement are displayed; they constantly reinforce the philosophy of the school and your drive to raise aspirations.

Safeguarding is effective.

The overwhelming majority of parents are very positive about the way the school safeguards their children and would recommend the school to other parents. As one parent wrote, 'It is very reassuring to know that my daughter is safe, happy and well looked after at Over Hall'. The school holds very comprehensive records of the vulnerable and at-risk pupils and works closely with a range of external agencies to ensure that these children receive all the help and support they may require. Teachers regularly raise any concerns they have with the designated safeguarding

person and these concerns are meticulously followed up. The school is doing all it can to keep its pupils safe. Safeguarding checks on governors, staff and any volunteers who work with children are thorough.

High-quality training, including training in the Prevent duty to keep pupils safe from exposure to extreme views, is undertaken by staff and governors so that they are up to date on current guidance and are well informed about all types of risk to children. Systems are in place to ensure that new members of staff receive relevant training before they commence their duties. All staff who work with children have completed restraint training to enable them to deal effectively with any violent or aggressive behaviour. Pupils themselves identified that on the occasions when a pupil has gone out of control, the situation is dealt with quickly, sympathetically and with care. Logs of any incidents are detailed and well maintained.

Every child whom I spoke to said that they felt safe in school. Pupils have a good understanding of the different types of bullying and they understand how to avoid risks, including online.

Inspection findings

- In the early years Reception class, there has been a year-on-year upward trend of improvement in the number of children who attain a good level of development. Children enter the class from a range of settings and some have had no experience of formal schooling. Many have very poorly developed social, speaking, listening and communication skills. From these low starting points, the majority make good progress. The school's projection is that there will be a further increase in outcomes this year, with 64% of children expected to reach a good level of development, which would bring the school closer to the national average. Boys generally make less progress than girls, and it was noticeable when we observed this class that some boys avoided activities that developed their writing and lacked the patience to complete tasks.
- Pupils get off to a good start in developing their reading skills. You and your staff have spent a lot of time and effort in improving the quality of teaching in phonics (letters and the sounds they represent) and this has been supported by relevant training. Pupils are ability grouped in Years 1 and 2 to ensure much more focused and relevant small-group teaching can take place. In addition, staff in key stage 2 have also received training, and during lunchtimes work as 'phonics buddies' with small numbers of pupils to ensure that these weaker pupils do not fall behind. Last year, 81% of Year 1 pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check. This was above the national average. The projection this year is that there will be a slight drop in outcomes to just below the expected national average. Despite this, the underlying trend is upwards. As a result of these good foundations, pupils' attainment in reading has improved over the last few years and at the end of key stage 2, standards are above the national average, with the majority of pupils making more than expected progress.

- A similar pattern is evident in the development of pupils' mathematical skills, with pupils attaining standards in key stage 1 that are close to the national average, and making good progress throughout key stage 2 to reach standards that are above the national average. This also reflects sustained improvement over time.
- Although there has been some improvement in writing, this has been slow, especially in key stage 1. Progress across key stage 2 is also less good in writing than in reading and mathematics. There is currently a strong drive to improve writing across the school and current school information suggests that there will be an improvement this year. The school has several new initiatives planned for next year, including involvement in the Primary Writing Project, which are intended to raise standards further.
- Writing across the curriculum is not yet well developed, particularly in the language-rich subjects such as history, geography and science. Pupils still find it difficult to transfer their skills. We observed pupils being able to complete a specific grammatical or punctuation task because they were often completing repetitive sentences within set parameters. We observed pupils writing sentences with subordinate clauses and using semi-colons correctly. However, they are not always able to transfer this to writing in other subjects and many are not yet naturally fluent writers. Some boys, in particular, often do not enjoy writing and are frequently let down by their poor presentation and spelling.
- Tasks set by teachers in a range of subjects such as science, history and geography, are often too simplistic or do not require an in-depth response. Limited tasks do not allow pupils sufficient opportunities to practise and develop their writing skills. In part, this reflects teachers' lack of confidence in teaching subjects other than English and mathematics because of weaker subject knowledge and more limited training in these areas.
- Pupils' behaviour, especially that of those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, is managed well. Pupils themselves are very aware that a small number of pupils who have regular outbursts need help, understanding and care. During our walk around the classrooms in the morning, we observed one incident which could have disrupted the lesson, but pupils got on with their exercises and allowed the teacher to calmly defuse what could have potentially been a volatile situation.
- Older pupils readily accept responsibility and, in discussions, they explained how they often step in to defuse a potentially confrontational situation, notably outside during break- or lunchtimes. They also expressed confidence in the adults' ability to control poor behaviour and challenge any bullying that might occur. They also enjoy opportunities to influence decisions around the school. For example, they were asked to write to the governors and trustees to provide their opinions for and against the value of using a dog in a therapeutic way to improve pupils' behaviour.

- Pupils were particularly pleased with improvements in the quality of their sport and physical education lessons. They have benefited from professional coaching as well as the training that teachers have received to improve their own skills in this area of the curriculum. Pupils are competitive and they particularly enjoy the more frequent opportunities to test their sporting prowess against that of other schools, as well as within school. All pupils in Years 5 and 6 are provided with the opportunity to learn a musical instrument such as the trumpet, trombone or clarinet. Some have really benefited from this and are gaining confidence and enjoyment from their newly acquired skills. However, far too many lack the perseverance and patience to make the best use of this opportunity.
- There are well-established systems in place to ensure the smooth running of the school. Regular monitoring of provision in classrooms is strongly linked to the performance management of staff, including both teachers and teaching assistants. This in turn identifies training needs.
- Pupil premium funding for pupils who are, or have been, eligible for free school meals, or who are looked after by the local authority, is being targeted and spent effectively. The achievement gap in reading and mathematics between these pupils and that of other pupils nationally has closed dramatically. It remains too wide in writing. Good use of additional support is ensuring that these pupils make at least good progress in their learning.
- Governors and trustees are kept well informed. They come from a wide range of backgrounds, including education and finance, which ensures a broad, well-balanced range of skills that enable them to ask challenging questions of school leaders. They visit school regularly and take a keen interest in what is going on in the classroom. They monitor spending closely.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the role of middle leaders continues to be developed so that:
 - they are well informed about what is going on in their area of responsibility and are able to provide relevant advice and support to their colleagues to enable them to teach across the full range of subjects with increasing confidence and effectiveness
 - pupils, notably boys, get good-quality opportunities, especially in subjects such as science, history and geography, to develop, utilise and practise their writing skills, as well as gain a deeper knowledge and understanding.

- the school continues to strive to improve attendance, especially of those pupils who are more persistent absentees.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Over Hall Community School converted for the second time to become a single academy trust in September 2015. The current substantive headteacher and deputy headteacher led the school in an acting capacity. Their posts were made permanent in January.

During the inspection, I met with you, representatives of the governing body and the trustees of the school as well as the subject leaders for English and the early years. We visited all classes in the school to observe teaching and learning as well as behaviour. I also met with two groups of pupils and looked at samples of their work. I met with parents at the start of the school day and considered the views of 16 parents posted on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, as well as a handwritten letter delivered to the school. I took into account the answers and comments from 19 staff at the school who had completed the online staff questionnaire. I also had a brief telephone conversation with the consultant who is providing advice to the school. A range of documentation, including school policies, the school development plan and self-evaluation as well as procedures to safeguard pupils, was looked at. Documentation from the school website was also considered.