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Mr Ian Gates
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Dear Mr Gates

Short inspection of The Cowplain School

Following my visit to the school on 26 June 2018 with Gary Tostevin, 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 April 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your principled and aspirational leadership has ensured that pupils benefit from a well-rounded education and strong pastoral care, despite the financial pressures due to the falling number of pupils on roll.

Cowplain is a friendly and harmonious school, where individuals matter and their successes are celebrated. A clearly understood set of values underpin the work of the school. These values provide clear direction and encourage pupils to develop positive attitudes to their learning and form strong relationships with their teachers and peers. Consequently, morale among pupils and teachers is high. Staff feel valued and empowered. Those who met with inspectors, and/or completed the staff survey, were remarkably positive about the school. All feel proud to work at the school and feel that it is well led and managed. Staff are particularly appreciative of leaders' efforts to reduce their workload, by improving the way feedback is given to pupils on their work. Parents are also overwhelmingly positive, and the school is increasingly gaining the confidence of the local community. This is reflected in admissions in Year 7, which rose significantly in September 2017.

You are supported well by your senior leadership team and your middle leaders. Together, they are increasingly effective in ensuring that standards of teaching more consistently reflect your high expectations. You, your leadership team and governors understand clearly the key priorities for further improvement. Governors know the school very well and provide strong challenge and support to you and

other leaders. School improvement priorities are carefully identified and timely actions to address weaknesses have had a positive impact. For example, a rigorous approach to tackling pupil absence has ensured that attendance has improved and is now slightly better than the national average.

Pupils value the strong relationships and the support they receive from staff. Pupils feel they are listened to and that their opinions are valued. Many pupils take part in leadership activities, which include, for example, representation on the governing body. Inspectors were impressed by the conduct and leadership skills demonstrated by the pupils involved in the Year 5 Mardi Gras activity, which took place on the day of the inspection. The behaviour of pupils in lessons and around the school is typically good. Pupils are polite and respectful towards each other, their teachers and visitors. They are proud of their school, wear their smart uniform well and take good care of the environment. They appreciate the wide range of clubs and other activities on offer. These includes a large variety of opportunities for pupils to develop their musical, artistic and dramatic talents.

Since the last inspection, the outcomes that pupils achieve in their GCSE examinations have steadily improved. Pupils' progress across the curriculum has consistently been in line with the national average and in humanities has been convincingly above average. In 2017, although overall attainment was below average, pupils with low or high prior attainment met the national average for their prior attainment group in attainment at grade 4 and 5+ in English and mathematics. Progress in science has also improved and is now in line with the national average. The school has developed a strong reputation locally for its provision and support for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Outcomes for these pupils have continued to improve and are at least in line with the national average.

However, you and your senior leaders are fully aware that some groups of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, do not yet achieve as well as other pupils with the same starting points. Also, pupils do not achieve the same standards in some of their GCSE subject choices as they do in their core subjects. You are tackling the underlying causes of this underachievement and are beginning to have an impact on current pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a strength of the school. Governors and the leadership team ensure that safeguarding arrangements are robust and rigorous. A dedicated and highly skilled team of staff works with determination and sensitivity alongside pupils, parents and external agencies to support pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

Staff closely monitor vulnerable pupils. Recent improvements to the way that safeguarding concerns are reported and recorded have made a positive difference and increased the confidence of staff in reporting concerns. Case studies discussed with inspectors showed evidence of prompt follow-up. Regular and thorough liaison

with external providers ensures that pupils are kept safe. All staff and governors receive helpful training that ensures they know how to keep pupils safe from abuse, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism.

The curriculum prepares pupils well for managing their own safety. A comprehensive and well-structured programme of activities delivered through lessons, reflection time and assemblies supports pupils' personal development and welfare effectively. The pupils that inspectors spoke to knew who to talk to if they had any concerns and had a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe online. Pupils reported that bullying, though it sometimes happens, is dealt with effectively by staff.

Inspection findings

- Inspectors looked at the impact leaders have had on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. In the past, disadvantaged pupils have made progress which is similar to that of other pupils nationally in the core subjects of English, mathematics, science and humanities. However, overall, the progress of this group of pupils has been below the national average and they have not achieved as well in their GCSE examinations as their peers. Leaders have prioritised increasing the attainment of this group and their progress is very carefully checked. Staff know the pupils well, think carefully, for example, about where they sit in the class and ensure that they are as fully involved in lessons as other pupils. Extra support is carefully planned, and leaders check thoroughly that it makes a difference to the learning and progress of these pupils.
- The school's own assessment information shows that the attainment of current disadvantaged pupils is slowly improving. In the lessons they visited, and in a review of pupils' work across a range of subjects, inspectors did not detect any obvious differences between disadvantaged and other pupils in their progress and attitudes to learning. However, sometimes teachers do not ensure that these pupils are provided with the support and challenge needed to maximise their progress.
- Leaders have been very proactive in improving home–school communication with the families of disadvantaged pupils. This is reflected in a significant increase in the number of parents who now attend parents' evenings. Disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress because they are attending school more regularly, although their absence rates are still higher than those of other pupils. Leaders also ensure that disadvantaged pupils are just as likely to benefit from the wide range of extra-curricular activities as other pupils.
- Leaders have taken effective actions to further improve the quality of teaching. They check teaching carefully and have identified relevant areas for improvement, particularly in improving challenge and the style of questions teachers pose. Staff share this strong culture to improve and are committed to sharing best practice. They welcome the regular training sessions where the most effective teaching approaches are shared.
- In lessons, teachers have high expectations and plan tasks that encourage pupils to participate well. Most teachers use questioning increasingly well to challenge

pupils and probe their understanding. Teachers assess pupils' learning regularly and provide them with clear and helpful feedback on how to improve their work in line with the school policy. Opportunities for pupils to revisit and consolidate their learning are carefully planned, although pupils' responses are variable. Leaders have identified that some groups of lower-attaining boys do not always use their feedback well. Also, pupils told inspectors that they would welcome more support on the most effective ways to revise. Leaders recognise that their plans to further improve teaching are ambitious and need more time to become fully embedded.

- The curriculum provides a high level of challenge for all pupils and ensures that they are well prepared for the next steps in their education. You are firm in your conviction that pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience success in challenging GCSE subjects. For example, the percentage of pupils achieving success in the subjects which make up the English Baccalaureate (English, mathematics, science, a foreign language and humanities) is above the national average. In addition, pupils benefit from an opportunity to study a wide range of optional subjects, including some which are less common, like law and psychology.
- Leaders regularly review the curriculum and adapt it to meet pupils' needs. The curriculum in key stage 3 now prepares pupils better for key stage 4 because it provides them with greater challenge and the opportunity to study at greater depth. Leaders have acted to address the weak attainment in some foundation subjects, for example design and technology, by introducing new vocational qualifications. However, the impact of this development remains to be seen.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- disadvantaged pupils, particularly boys, make rapid progress so that the gap between their attainment and that of other pupils diminishes further
- the good teaching that exists in most areas is firmly embedded so that pupils make sustained and substantial progress, particularly in the optional subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Bagust
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

My colleague and I held meetings with you, other leaders, staff and governors. We spoke to groups of pupils formally and informally. We visited several classes to observe learning, looked at the quality of work in pupils' books and observed them at breaktime and lunchtime. A range of documents were considered including leaders' self-evaluation, safeguarding, current pupils' progress and the work of governors. The team took account of responses to the Ofsted online survey, Parent View (57 responses), and the outcomes of a staff survey (61 responses). There were no responses to the online pupil survey.