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Miss Julie Richardson
Headteacher
Verulam School
Brampton Road
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Dear Miss Richardson

Urgent inspection of Verulam School

Following my visit with Caroline Dawes, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 8 November 2022, I write on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and the time you took to discuss your school.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for urgent inspections. The inspection was carried out because His Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the school as concerns had been raised with Ofsted. There were also concerns about aspects of the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school (including governance) and behaviour and attitudes of pupils at the school.

We do not give graded judgements on urgent inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but where no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a graded inspection, which will be carried out under section 5 of the Act and be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the urgent inspection as a graded inspection immediately.

Evidence

We scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. We met with the headteacher, chief executive officer and deputy headteacher. In addition, we held formal meetings with groups of pupils from different year groups, a group of nine teachers, a group of six support staff and six members of the governing body via video link.

The lead inspector spoke with a family intervention worker from the local authority. The team inspector spoke with the headteacher at the alternative provision used by the school.

Both inspectors observed pupils' behaviour around the school and had informal conversations with some staff and pupils. Inspectors also scrutinised attendance records, records of pupils' movements and considered 140 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for parents, Ofsted Parent View, including 75 free-text comments.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is effective.

Main Findings

Leaders ensure that safeguarding is prioritised. They carry out the required pre-employment checks on adults working in the school. Staff understand how to record any safeguarding concerns. Leaders respond to issues raised in a timely and appropriate manner. They commissioned an external review of safeguarding to help further improve their processes and systems. Consequently, these are now more clearly defined and better understood by staff. Leaders are aware that they have work to do to ensure that records are more detailed in order to improve the rigour of the systems in place. This will support leaders to quickly and efficiently check data and evaluate how well the system is working.

Leaders ensure that all staff, including governors, receive appropriate, regular safeguarding training. Focused themes for training are informed by local contexts and the needs of staff. Weekly safeguarding updates help staff to keep a close eye on the most vulnerable pupils. Leaders recently identified, for example, that staff needed further information about domestic abuse. Training in this aspect of safeguarding has taken place to inform staff's wider understanding.

Pupils feel safe in the school. The curriculum content teaches pupils how to stay safe in their local context and online. This information is also shared with pupils through assemblies and enrichment days. Pupils are aware of their digital footprint and know not to share personal details on social media platforms. They say that they have an adult that they would and could go to if they had a concern.

The new behaviour policy, in place from September 2022, outlines expected standards of behaviour and the associated rewards and sanctions. Although leaders explained the new policy to pupils at the start of the academic year, many pupils are still not clear about what has changed. Nevertheless, records show that because of leaders' raised expectations, the number of detentions issued, which was high at the start of the year, is now decreasing.

Most of the time, pupils' behaviour is calm and orderly. Leaders have made further changes focused on continuous improvements. A new timetable, which includes split breaktimes and lunchtimes, means that the corridors are less crowded. Leaders have also identified areas where boisterous behaviour is more likely, and so they make sure duty staff are present in these spaces. Pupils say that as a result of these changes, they feel and are safer.

Pupils say that behaviour is sometimes not as good as it should be, and that this can disrupt their learning. Leaders are providing further support for staff to ensure that the revised behaviour policy is applied consistently and fairly. Pupils do not consistently take responsibility for their own behaviour and attitudes.

Pupils say that bullying sometimes happens in school. This occasionally includes discriminatory language. They say that staff do not always deal with this consistently. However, they are confident that leaders will resolve any incidents when they are formally reported. Leaders' records detail timely and appropriate responses to any bullying concerns raised. Pupils and staff spoken with during the inspection said that pupils' behaviour was better than it had been previously.

Following an internal review, leaders have identified the need to develop the personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme in order to strengthen the wider development of pupils. They are focusing on promoting the values of understanding and respect. Strategies are in place to support pupils from all communities. For example, the 'happy as I am' club and staff wearing rainbow lanyards support LGBTQ+ pupils. Pupils say that it is fine to be different. However, there is a lack of consistency with regard to awareness of wider issues of diversity in the school. While this work has started, leaders know they have more to do to ensure that pupils are more directly involved in changing the ethos and culture within the school.

Pupils are rising to the challenge of earning rewards by demonstrating the seven 'Verulam Values'. The rewards system promotes pupil friendships between year groups and provides a vehicle for pupil voice. It also develops healthy competition between year groups. Pupils appreciate the blue stag awards, letters of recognition and house points that they receive from leaders for achieving the school values. Leaders update the house point totals for the week and a running total for each house on the school's website. Pupils are motivated to achieve the values. This has helped to develop a strong sense of community and competition within the school.

Pupils' attendance is effectively monitored. Absences are followed up quickly. Relevant information is routinely passed to members of the school's safeguarding team. The attendance of pupils who access their education through an alternative provision is closely monitored. There are strong links between the school and the alternative provider. Leaders maintain detailed records of all pupils leaving the school. Most pupils leave because they move out of the area. There is no evidence of gaming or off-rolling.

A more stable staffing over the past academic year has enabled leaders to implement a more consistent approach to improving the school. Staff say that leaders are considerate of their workload and supportive of their well-being.

Governors are mindful of the workload of leaders and all staff. They have restructured the structure and times of governing body meetings, for example to reduce the impact of workload on senior leaders. The trust provides access to services to support staff's mental health and well-being. As part of the restructure of the governing body, and in response to identified pupils' and staff's needs, a new link governor role has been created to support mental health and well-being in the school.

Additional support

The trust has a good understanding of the school, its strengths and its areas for further development. The school has, over the past academic year, commissioned external reviews linked to behaviour, the PSHE curriculum and the school's provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and safeguarding. Leaders, including governors and the trust, have acted on the findings from the reviews. Leaders work closely with the local authority to support pupils who exhibit more challenging behaviours.

Priorities for further improvement

- Leaders have acted to ensure that safeguarding arrangements are secure, and that pupils' behaviour is improving. However, aspects of systems, for example the level of detail of the information that is recorded, and organisation of some information, require further refinement. Leaders need to review and evaluate their systems to ensure that they provide the information they need to supplement and support the effective safeguarding processes already in place.
- While pupils' behaviour is improving, some pupils do not understand the school's behaviour policy and so their conduct falls short of leaders' expectations. Some staff do not apply the behaviour policy consistently well. Leaders should ensure that pupils and staff are provided with further support and guidance so that behaviour continues to improve.
- Leaders have identified areas that they need to develop in the school. They have put appropriate strategies in place. However, pupils' views are not routinely used effectively to inform their decisions, and as a result, some pupils are not fully invested in the ambition that leaders are trying to achieve. Leaders need to work more closely with pupils so that the culture and ethos of the school become more tolerant and inclusive.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, and the chief executive officer of The Alban Academies Trust. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Wayne Jarvis
His Majesty's Inspector