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Mr David Couch
Principal
Hamilton Lodge School for Deaf Children
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Dear Mr Couch

Short inspection of Hamilton Lodge School for Deaf Children

Following my visit to the school on 14 December 2015, 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 July 2012.

This school continues to be good.

You have maintained and built upon the good standards reached at the last inspection. Leadership roles in the school and governing body have been clarified more precisely, teaching is improving and pupils make good progress from their different starting points, including learners in the post-16 provision. Pupils behave well, developing more confidence and a strong sense of identity because they are cared for exceptionally well by a stable team of devoted staff.

Following your appointment in 2014, you have focused on tackling the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and also on promoting the work of the school more widely. Teaching is observed more frequently and you have initiated a programme of learning walks and observation to be carried out by subject leaders. There is more sharing of good practice in teaching and learning and, as a result, lessons are consistently more stimulating and focused on pupils' learning. The most-able pupils are being challenged more and expectations of all pupils have been raised.

Leaders and all staff working in the school carry out their duties with dedication and energy, with a strong commitment to improving pupils' communication. Staff rate highly the quality of training and professional development that they receive, and they quickly acquire impressive skills in British Sign Language (BSL), which is the medium of communication used throughout the school. Hearing and deaf staff work

together as a strong team and are inspiring role models for pupils, demonstrating that sensory impairment is no barrier to success.

Leaders rightly pay close attention to pupils' well-being and emotional and physical health. Some pupils arrive at the school, after damaging experiences in their previous education settings, with a poor sense of self-worth and lack of confidence. Staff do all that they can to support pupils effectively and ensure that they get back on track to making progress in lessons and feeling more positive about themselves. It is notable that pupils make quick gains in their learning and self-esteem following their admission to the school. Pupils who stay on into the post-16 provision achieve good results in public examinations.

You and your leadership team have identified precisely what still needs to be improved in the school, in order to be judged outstanding. You are determined to make improvements to the teaching of literacy across the school, and you know that this poses a considerable challenge for pupils whose first language is British Sign Language. Some pupils have very limited knowledge of the sounds that letters make and consequently find writing difficult to master. You are also aware that better and more precise use of the information about pupils' progress could be made in order to assure outstanding outcomes.

You have made sensible clarifications to senior leadership roles, including the shrewd retention of the post of head of school, which staff appreciate. You correctly identified that the school had previously not made enough use of external links and are keen to forge strong relationships with employers, to ensure that pupils leave school with realistic prospects of secure and sustainable career pathways. In short, you are aiming to promote the school as a leader in the field of deaf education, and with your range of experience and clear vision for the future, the school is in a strong position to fulfil this aim.

Safeguarding is effective.

Senior leaders have made sure that all policies and procedures for keeping pupils safe meet government requirements and take account of up-to-date guidance. Staff have been well-trained to identify potential risks to pupils, including child sexual exploitation and radicalisation or extremism. The system for reporting any concerns is followed diligently and referrals are followed up promptly. A highly vigilant approach of 'write what you see' ensures that staff act quickly when they are concerned, notwithstanding any difficulties pupils may have with communicating. Meticulous records of referrals made to local authorities provide a detailed account of the school's actions and the response from the safeguarding and child protection teams. Exemplary communication between the residential homes and school ensures that pupils receive the right help and guidance.

Staff recognise that hearing impaired pupils benefit from keeping in touch via social media, but are acutely aware that this may pose a serious risk. Pupils are given useful guidance, including direct teaching, to help them keep safe when using social

networking sites. An impressive programme of training for staff and parents is in place, in addition to close monitoring of pupils' internet usage. Where there have been concerns about inappropriate contact through social media, school leaders have taken immediate and effective action to protect pupils. Governors also consider safeguarding as their paramount priority and closely oversee the school's work to keep pupils safe from harm.

Inspection findings

- Accountability of subject leaders has been strengthened since the last inspection. Leaders monitor teaching more closely, carrying out learning walks and work scrutinies. They have rightly identified that teaching style may differ, but teaching is most effective when the focus is on pupils' learning and progress.
- Pupils make good progress from their very varied starting points. Lower-attaining pupils, those with additional needs, disadvantaged pupils and the most-able pupils all achieve well.
- The assessment system has been overhauled and a new software package has been introduced, which is designed to track pupils' progress and personal development more closely. This has the potential to enable senior leaders to have a detailed and coherent overview of progress and patterns of behaviour. The system has only recently been introduced, so it is not possible to judge its full impact.
- The strongest teaching can be seen in art, drama, physical education and design technology. Students make excellent progress, often from very low starting points where they may lack confidence and self-belief. An effective blend of practical activities, animated and expressive teacher demonstration and appealing and well-chosen resources inspire pupils to aim high and achieve results that compare well with those of pupils in mainstream schools. Pupils' work showed impressive gains in learning, when a series of activities led up to a completed assignment or product that they could be proud of.
- Pupils make good progress in mathematics because skilled and patient teaching ensures that they acquire mastery of subject concepts and skills, and gain sufficient practical application of their mathematical skills, knowledge and understanding.
- There is slower progress in literacy and English. For most pupils, British Sign Language is their first language, and they sometimes struggle with understanding written English grammar and tense usage. Some are reluctant to write because of their difficulties with 'translating' their

signing into letters and words. In order to tackle this, teachers have relied on overly simple worksheets in some subjects, including English, some of which do not have a lasting impact on pupils' understanding or link to other learning. As a result, some pupils do not progress to extended sentence composition or longer written assignments quickly enough.

- Nevertheless, pupils make good progress in their acquisition of new vocabulary. Teachers encourage pupils' precise use of correct key words and also provide word banks to extend their knowledge. Each pupil's literacy profile is made available to teachers, so that they know exactly what to focus on and what will help pupils communicate more effectively and achieve more in written work.
- Reading is promoted well in the school. Books are on display throughout the building and there is a well-stocked library of appropriate books for each age group and level of ability. Pupils encounter a wide range of different books in English lessons and enjoy classic stories and plays. As a result, pupils make good progress with reading.
- Pupils study a rich range of subjects which prepares them well for their next steps. Learners in the post-16 provision follow appropriate pathways, including courses in local colleges, which lead directly to further education, placements at special schools or employment. Pupils all follow an accredited course in deaf studies, which is highly successful and designed to encourage pupils' awareness of their identity, increase their self-esteem and promote their pride in themselves.
- During the inspection I observed pupils' warm and respectful relationships with staff. Pupils across the school get along together harmoniously and supportively. An active school council ensures that pupils' views are taken into account and their concerns are always responded to promptly.
- Pupils' behaviour and attendance improves while they are at the school. For those pupils who sometimes display challenging behaviour, there are clear risk assessments and plans to support them. However, senior leaders have rightly identified that more should be done to analyse incidents of poor behaviour in order to evaluate any patterns and thereby prevent recurrence.
- Opportunities for pupils to shine and take part in extra-curricular activities abound throughout the school. During the inspection, pupils were all involved in putting on the Christmas production of 'The Lion,

the Witch and the Wardrobe' and I had the privilege of watching the final rehearsal. Pupils benefited from the tireless enthusiasm of staff, working together successfully to put the finishing touches to their performance. Some pupils who previously lacked self-assurance and shied away from the limelight, took on major roles. Pupils supported each other and showed leadership at this important time when the school comes together to showcase its work to parents and visitors.

- Parents wholeheartedly value the work of the school. All parents who responded to the school's own survey and the Ofsted online survey Parent View, would recommend the school and none had any concerns.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- they make effective use of the new system of recording pupils' progress and behaviour in order to evaluate the impact of work to bring improvements more precisely, and plan for even better outcomes
- pupils make quicker gains in their literacy skills and that outcomes in English catch up with the best that is seen elsewhere in the school
- subject leaders make more impact on improving the quality of teaching so that more is outstanding.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- I met with you, senior leaders and the Chair of the Governing Body. I also spoke to the school improvement partner on the telephone.
- I observed English and mathematics teaching and made a visit to the rehearsal for the school Christmas production, accompanied by the head of school. I also observed the regular school council meeting, which takes place every Tuesday lunchtime.
- The head of school and one other member of staff acted as interpreters when I observed teaching, met pupils and spoke to staff and the Chair of the Governing Body.
- I scrutinised a representative sample of pupils' work, selected from a mixture of year groups and across the full range of subjects.
- A range of documentation, including information about pupils' progress and behaviour, the school improvement plan and safeguarding checks,

policies and procedures, was scrutinised. We discussed your own evaluation of the school's effectiveness.

- I took into account the 18 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.