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20 July 2017

Mrs Diane Ellingham
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Dear Mrs Ellingham

Short inspection of The Orchard School

Following my visit to the school on 4 July 2017 with Matt Wilson, 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 outstanding in June 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You became headteacher of the school about 18 months ago and, along with governors, have steered the school through a difficult period of change, managing a number of staffing issues, including high levels of sickness absence. You recognise that for a period of time this affected the standards in the school. However, you, other leaders and the highly skilled team of governors have worked hard to ensure that an outstanding quality of education is once more being provided to pupils. You take the well-being of pupils and staff seriously, and your commitment to following through the outcomes of the recent well-being Charter Mark shows that you recognise the importance of support for the whole school community.

It is clear that pupils are happy to come to school and from the moment they arrive, the excellent relationships between staff and pupils are clear to see. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and the difference it has made to their children's development. Parents told inspectors about the progress their children had made in a number of areas, including speech and language development, eating and learning to walk. Parents' responses to a range of surveys show how happy they are with the school's work, including the support for learning at home.

Personalised learning is at the heart of the school's approach to the curriculum. Staff know pupils very well and this means that pupils are given the right amount of help to make progress.

At the same time, pupils are encouraged to develop their independence. Sometimes, pupils need extra time if they are to complete an activity without help. Staff recognise this and do not rush pupils or give them help with a task if they know they can attempt it on their own. This helps pupils to become more confident and independent.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is excellent. Pupils show respect for one another, and for staff, and strong relationships are clear to see. Pupils who need additional help to communicate are supported in several different ways. For example, pupils use real objects, symbols or photographs when moving from one area of school to another to help them prepare for their next activity. Some use personalised systems of communication that they carry round the school with them. Staff use signing consistently around school when talking to pupils and many pupils sign and talk to staff. Inspectors saw pupils using these skills to great effect during choir practice, where they signed and sang beautifully, with great enthusiasm. Their enjoyment was clear to see!

The inclusive early years provision in the school provides learning experiences of a high quality, meeting the needs of individual children from early years and key stage 1. The early years leader and with her staff know and understand the needs of the children extremely well. The curriculum is adapted to make learning fun and accessible for all, regardless of how complex their needs are. Inspectors saw some children having a great deal of fun making marks with yogurt, or experiencing its coldness and texture as it was poured slowly over their hands. Other children were being helped to activate a switch in a quiet area of the classroom where there were no distractions, so that they could see a visually stimulating pattern. The outdoor environment is used creatively, and different groups mix together for a variety of activities. Children with the most complex difficulties, including those who need high levels of medical support, are able to access the outdoor area purposefully. A separate 'dark room' has been created outside to help children get used to learning in different environments.

Staff in the early years understand the small steps of progress that children make. Detailed learning journeys for each child show the range of activities in which they take part, and the progress they make. Staff liaise with the occupational therapist to develop sensory approaches to learning, and other approaches such as on-body signing are used, depending on the need. Staff track children's progress carefully, using the early learning goals, but are also able to capture small steps of learning through their own assessment system based on P levels. This means that the progress of individuals can be tracked from the moment they start school until they are ready to leave.

The home learning project which has been piloted in the school has been very well received by parents. Staff are able to work with parents to guide them in ways to support their child with their learning and behaviour at home. Without exception, parents said how this had made a positive difference to home life. Given the success of the project, leaders plan to extend it to more pupils in the school next term.

In addition to this, staff include 'ways to help your child at home' on their school reports. These are written clearly and parents have said how helpful they are.

At the previous inspection in June 2014, the school was asked to make sure that all teachers use a consistent approach when gathering samples of work. This would enable staff to compare standards achieved by pupils within the school and with other local special schools. Leaders have introduced a system whereby staff meet on a termly basis to look at samples of pupils' work across different subjects, and check to see if the levels given to a piece of work are accurate. Staff work not only in their own phase, but across other phases of the school to do this. Leaders have developed a detailed record sheet which is used by all members of staff so that judgements made are consistent and accurate.

Staff now have the opportunity to work with staff from other schools in the Black Country Partnership, where they meet regularly with samples of pupils' work and check that they are making accurate judgements about pupils' achievements. Given the complexity of needs of some pupils, staff will sometimes use video evidence to show what a pupil is able to do. The early years leader works closely with a similar group in the local authority, with a specific early years focus. The rigour of this work means that staff are making more accurate judgements about pupils' achievements, which leads to more reliable information about pupils' progress over time.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding systems are thorough and effective. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in school and this view is echoed by parents and staff. There is a strong culture of safeguarding, which is understood by all staff in the school. This is because staff receive regular training and updates on all aspects of safeguarding. Staff know what they need to do if they have a concern about a pupil, and referrals are followed up in a timely way by the designated safeguarding lead (DSL).

The DSL monitors referrals and general welfare concerns regularly. The DSL, the school's family liaison officer and other outside agencies work together to make sure that pupils receive the right support at the right time. Procedures for recruiting new staff are thorough, and a number of leaders and governors have been trained in safer recruitment. The link safeguarding governor attends monthly safeguarding meetings at the school, where practice is reviewed and concerns are discussed.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have a clear understanding of the performance of different groups of pupils. This is because they collect and analyse information about pupils' progress at regular intervals and check that accurate judgements about pupils' achievements are being made. Information about what pupils can do when they begin school is collected in an organised way. Teachers use this to plan their next steps of learning. Pupils are achieving outstanding outcomes in their learning, year on year, and any difference in the performance of different groups has been

diminished. In most cases, there is now no difference between the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils, non-disadvantaged pupils and pupils from ethnic minorities.

- Leaders recognise that some pupils have English as an additional language as well as additional learning needs, so they make sure that they track individual progress as well as the progress of groups. The development of language and communication is fundamental to the school's approach to learning and threads through all aspects of the curriculum. The school has invested in additional support for speech and language to make sure that pupils are well supported. The school has recently been re-accredited with the Basic Skills Quality Mark and has also achieved the Early Years Basic Quality Mark for the first time. This is in recognition of the strengths in the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills.
- Leaders recognise that their assessment systems will need further refinement, once P levels are no longer in use. This includes further work on developing the monitoring of the creative curriculum. You have already begun to work on refining systems for assessment with other local schools, and you are planning to extend this work in the future.
- Disadvantaged pupils are achieving excellent outcomes because they are given support which meets their needs. Leaders use assessment information to see where pupils may have gaps in their learning and use a range of interventions to address these gaps. Class teachers have the responsibility for developing specific intervention plans, and work with leaders and outside agencies to make sure that pupils are given the right support they need. Last year, leaders recognised that there was a gap in the performance of disadvantaged pupils in English and mathematics, and used additional pupil premium funding to address this. Governors check on the way pupil premium funding is used, and they told inspectors that they valued seeing examples of pupils' work, showing the progress they had made.
- As progress in mathematics was not as good as progress in English last year, the subject leader for mathematics took steps to identify why this was the case. As a result of the detailed analysis of pupils' achievements, the mathematics curriculum, and the way it is planned and delivered, has been changed. Staff have benefited from additional training in helping pupils to develop early mathematical understanding, in sorting and matching for example. As a result, pupils are now making improved progress in mathematics.
- Leaders' and governors' resilience and commitment to ensuring that pupils achieve the best outcomes is clear. They want the very best for the pupils. They recognise that, sometimes, difficult decisions have to be made, but pupils remain at the heart of everything they do. Leaders and governors know that there needs to be further work on developing the roles of middle leaders, so that they are clear about their responsibilities.
- Leaders make sure that staff receive comprehensive training in all aspects of safeguarding. Governors have also benefited from a range of safeguarding training. Staff have been trained to look out for any signs of concern linked to radicalisation and extremism, female genital mutilation and child exploitation. In addition to this, staff are trained and regularly updated in safe ways in moving and handling pupils and other aspects of health and safety, including poolside training. New members of staff are given a mentor to guide them through the

induction process.

- Leaders pay close attention to pupils' attendance, and actions they have taken, including fixed penalty notices, has resulted in improving attendance. Some pupils who were previously persistently absent received targeted support and as a result they now attend regularly. Some pupils have extremely complex medical conditions which have an impact on how often they can attend school. Leaders do not use this as an excuse for low attendance. They have appointed additional healthcare assistants to support pupils with their medical needs. This means that pupils can attend school more regularly because they receive the support they need.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they review and refine the roles of middle leaders so that they are more sharply focused on school improvement priorities
- they extend the monitoring of the creative curriculum so that pupils' progress can be tracked.

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

Yours sincerely

Deb Jenkins
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and senior leaders to discuss progress since the last inspection, your school's self-evaluation and agree key lines of enquiry. In order to explore these areas, my colleague and I:

- met with the school office manager to review the school's single central record, including sampling of personnel files
- met with a group of parents to discuss their views of the school
- met with the chair, vice chair and three other governors
- spoke to pupils both formally and informally about their views of the school
- scrutinised a range of school documents, including: the school's self-evaluation, performance and assessment information, safeguarding documents, behaviour support plans, child protection files, governing body minutes, intervention plans, risk assessments, external reports and training records
- visited lessons across all key stages, accompanied by senior and middle leaders
- looked at examples of work across a range of subjects with leaders

- met with the school's improvement adviser
- took account of the responses to the online staff questionnaire.

As there were only three responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, inspectors considered the school's own survey responses from parents.