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Mrs Debra Coburn
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Coburn

Short inspection of Firwood High School

Following my visit to the school on 30 January 2018 with Ann Gill, 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school faced a difficult period approximately two years ago. At that time, the local authority raised concerns about the school's effectiveness and, in particular, some aspects of safeguarding pupils. Since then, an executive headteacher and a new headteacher have been appointed, the governing body has been reconstituted and a number of members of staff have left the school. The school has moved through a period of rapid improvement and is now, once again, effective, including in its approaches to safeguarding. You and other leaders have identified a clear path to becoming even more effective as the experience and confidence of leaders grow further.

Leaders are currently working towards the school becoming an academy in partnership with a local primary special school. This process has taken longer than anticipated. However, leaders now expect academy conversion to be completed later this school year.

Many pupils in the school have complex needs and their academic starting points are very low. However, this does not reduce leaders' and teachers' determination to help pupils learn as well as possible. The school sets out to provide 'Learning without limits!' Staff achieve this in many different ways, for example by providing pupils with increasing confidence in the skills that will help them to live as independently as possible in the future. This focus on learning is not at the cost of close attention to the care of pupils. Staff are highly aware of pupils' individual learning and personal needs and make sure that they address them properly. Pupils

understand the commitment staff have towards them. They enjoy coming to school and sometimes show this by being reluctant to leave at the end of the school day. Adults' careful support encourages pupils to try hard and to engage well in learning. The positive relationships between staff and pupils, and among pupils, also contribute to the school's culture of learning and success.

Very nearly all of the parents and carers who shared their views with inspectors were very complimentary about the work of the school. They recognise the impact of the recent changes to leadership and management and value the support the school provides to their children and their families. One parent summed this up by indicating that the school, 'allows parents to be proud of their children'. Pupils' views are similarly very positive. They say that they enjoy school, and are happy and feel safe.

At the previous inspection, inspectors asked leaders and teachers to develop teaching further by making the best use of the school's new facilities and teachers' subject expertise. Teaching in the school helps pupils to make good progress. The school's specialist facilities are well used. Inspectors saw pupils enjoying cooking in their specially adapted food technology room and developing their physical skills in physical education and hydrotherapy sessions. Leaders have ensured that the best use of the buildings is made to provide a suitably attractive and stimulating learning environment. Previously white walls have been redecorated and wall display is used to celebrate pupils' learning and to provide information for members of staff.

You and other leaders acknowledge that, while teaching works well, the models of effective practice that you have developed in some subjects could be further extended.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that the arrangements for safeguarding pupils are systematic and robust. The child protection and safeguarding policy is easily available for reference on the school's website. This policy provides clear information and advice. Together with regular training, it gives a tight framework for the active response of leaders and other members of staff to any child protection issues. Leaders are prepared to act and challenge outside agencies when they identify potential gaps in the provision available. Such circumstances have included ensuring that paediatric nursing has continued to be available in the school and that there is as smooth as possible a transition in social care responsibility from children's to adults' services for the oldest students. Teachers, teaching assistants and other adults in the school are aware of potential additional risk to pupils resulting from their needs and linked additional vulnerability. Staff are confident about taking appropriate action when needed.

The building is secure and visitors are properly checked before they have access. The arrangements for pupils' arrival and departure on school transport are well organised to minimise any risk to pupils and the adults supporting them.

Inspection findings

- The success of the recent improvements to leadership in the school indicates that leaders have the necessary skills and experience for the school to improve further. The urgent changes to leadership in the fairly recent past led to marked changes in all aspects of the school's culture. These included a large drop in the number of behavioural incidents requiring staff to use physical intervention. In addition, there is better learning as a result of reorganised teaching, with a reduced number of changes of staffing for pupils during the school day. Senior leaders have managed this change in a way that raised the expectations of staff while also building their confidence and morale.
- Leaders are honest, open and accurate in their evaluation of the school's strengths and areas for development. This self-evaluation is very useful in planning for the next stages of improvement. The priorities that leaders identify are well matched to the needs of the school.
- Governors are confident that they now provide much clearer challenge to leaders than in the past. The information provided to them by school leaders is detailed and comprehensive. This means that governors are able to identify for themselves the most important things to ask about. The arrangements for governance are currently complicated because a shadow governance structure is running in parallel with the governing body in anticipation of the expected academy conversion. Governors have made sure that this has not deflected them from the determination they share with leaders for the school to work as well as possible.
- Pupils in the school make good progress. This is often in very small steps. However, staff are able to identify this progress because they carefully determine and target the gains that they are expecting. Whenever possible, the school links learning to the national curriculum. However, assessment is usually against the national framework for recognising attainment below the levels seen in most schools. Leaders and teachers are aware that this system is changing for all schools. They have started to consider how they will adjust teaching and learning in response. This development is still at an early stage. Pupils' progress in speaking has improved as a result of shared development work for all staff with the support of the speech therapists who work with pupils. Leaders are now focusing on producing similar gains in pupils' reading and writing.
- Teachers and other classroom staff use consistent approaches to teaching. An example of this is how they know about and use the best ways of communicating with pupils. Where needed, staff and pupils successfully use computer-based systems to do this. Staff set clear objectives for pupils' learning. They are demanding but highly supportive in encouraging pupils to achieve these objectives. Much teaching deeply engages pupils in their learning. For example, an inspector saw pupils thoroughly enjoying using a radio-controlled car as a way to make the learning of English highly effective. Equally, staff make simple approaches, such as enabling pupils to understand what sprayed water is and feels like, work just as well.

- Provision in the sixth form is highly effective. Students are helped to select a pathway for their learning which best matches their needs, such as horticulture or catering. Whatever subjects students follow, staff ensure that students increasingly develop the key skills they will need to help them in the future. Students in the sixth form practise their skills by running a breaktime bistro service for their peers. Different classes take it in turns to do this. Teachers effectively use this experience as a learning opportunity by matching tasks to individual students' learning objectives. Students enjoy the real-world tasks of preparing simple food and handling money. Staff arrange for the oldest students to have opportunities for work experience and to learn about independent living. Leaders currently have plans to extend this type of provision further and have submitted a bid to secure funding to provide continuing education to young adults aged 19 and over.
- Pupils attend school regularly. Leaders and other staff maintain a careful system to check that pupils attend school as often as possible and to challenge any unacceptable absence. The published information about attendance in 2017 indicated that pupils' absence had increased compared with that in recent years. Leaders' thorough analysis indicates that this increase in overall absence related to the particular circumstances of a small number of pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- further increase the confidence of leaders across the school to make sure that they have the greatest impact on pupils' success
- consolidate the school's approaches to teaching and raising standards, for example by extending the effective strategies concerning speech and communication to pupils' reading and writing
- use the process of the school becoming an academy to secure further partnerships for the benefit of pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors met with you, the executive headteacher and other senior leaders to discuss the school's effectiveness. Inspectors had discussions with the chair and other members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. An inspector spoke with two healthcare professionals who work with pupils in the school. Inspectors met with a group of pupils and saw others around the school during lessons and breaks. An inspector also met with a cross-section of staff. An inspector toured the school with you. Inspectors observed teaching and learning in classes across the school, mainly as a joint activity with a senior leader. Inspectors scrutinised a sample of pupils' books and other work jointly with two senior leaders. They examined documents, including information about the safeguarding of pupils, the school's self-evaluation document, the improvement plan, minutes of meetings of the governing body and information about pupils' achievement. They considered 18 responses recorded this school year on Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, including 12 additional written responses. Inspectors also reviewed 46 responses from members of staff to their online questionnaire and surveys of pupils' and parents' views completed by the school towards the end of last school year.