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Mr Neil Strain  
Headteacher  
Stony Dean School  
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Dear Mr Strain

### **Short inspection of Stony Dean School**

Following my visit to the school on 5 March 2019, 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 November 2014.

### **This school continues to be outstanding.**

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment as headteacher in September 2016, you have continued to transform the lives of the pupils in your care. Parents and carers are overwhelmingly supportive of the work of the school and they especially appreciate the commitment of you and your staff to do the very best for each child. Your fellow leaders are as driven as you to seek the best possible future for your pupils, and your staff have risen to the challenge you have set them. You have sought successful partnerships, both with similar special schools and with local businesses, to provide additional support for your school to develop further. As a result, pupils are making strong progress across all key stages and are exceptionally well prepared for their next steps in education, training or employment.

This is a vibrant school where pupils relish taking part in school life. They are very positive about their experiences in school and they are especially upbeat about the rich and varied curriculum that they experience. Pupils particularly enjoy the innovative environment, such as the running track, the driving range and the outdoor gym. Most pupils attend school well; however, a few pupils struggle to attend as often as you would like. You have developed an impressive degree of independence in your pupils, despite the challenges they face. They are proud, both to share their work and to talk about their learning. Pupils also work very well together and enjoy studying new topics. As a result, pupils thrive in the school.

Parents are very pleased with the school, with several parents describing the school as 'amazing'. They especially value the individual support provided to their children, and one parent commented that her son had 'absolutely blossomed since joining the school'. Parents described a key strength of the school as the support they receive when their children refuse to attend school because of anxiety. You and your leaders communicate very effectively with parents and solve any concerns quickly. Parents are very committed to the school and, through the very supportive parents' association, raise funds for equipment and activities to support pupils' enrichment.

You have maintained the strengths identified in the last inspection. Pupils achieve a range of qualifications in English and mathematics at the end of key stages 4 and 5, as appropriate to their starting points. Pupils continue to be exceptionally well prepared for their future, with all pupils going on to further education or training when they leave Stony Dean. You have introduced a new whole-school strategic approach to planning and assessment. As a result, pupils are making strong progress in their communication skills and are rapidly developing their independence. Pupils get a very strong start in Year 7 due to the excellent transition arrangements that you have established. However, you are not complacent, and have addressed pupils' weaknesses in writing, so that pupils are now writing more frequently and accurately than before.

You have successfully addressed the area identified for improvement at the last inspection. You and your team have sought out the most innovative and effective approaches to improve the fabric of the school. The school is now an exciting and lively environment that is well suited to the needs of your pupils. Pupils' work adorns the walls in every room, and in all the corridors there are terrific displays capturing pupils' trips and activities. As a result, pupils are very proud of their school and look after it well.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

You have overhauled your procedures since the last inspection. As a result, safeguarding practice is now very strong. The systems and procedures in place to keep children safe are especially thorough and robust. There is appropriate and frequent training for all staff, including those with additional responsibilities. Leaders and governors scrutinise and test this aspect of the school's work frequently and rigorously. The school's safeguarding policy is appropriate and up to date. Staff, volunteers and governors receive regular training, and consequently are confident about what to do if they have worries about a pupil.

Pupils, parents and staff are very positive about this aspect of the school's work. The more vulnerable pupils are very well catered for, and there are strong links with other agencies. Leaders are dogged in their pursuit of the best support and outcomes for their pupils. There is especially innovative practice in supporting pupils with anxiety who refuse to come to school. Consequently, parents are very confident about the care and support their children receive.

## Inspection findings

- During this inspection, inspectors looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including: the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements to protect pupils online; the post-16 programme; pupils' achievement in the foundation pathway in key stage 4; how well leaders and governors ensure that disadvantaged pupils achieve well; and how leaders support those pupils with especially low attendance.
- The pupils who attend Stony Dean School are especially vulnerable when using social media or when online. Consequently, leaders have taken effective steps to review and improve the support for these pupils and their parents. The guidance on your website, the training for staff, and lessons for pupils, are second to none. As a result, pupils are confident and 'self-policing' when issues are raised. However, you are not complacent, and the school is taking part in an innovative international project to develop resources to help pupils manage further this critical area of their lives.
- You are rightly ambitious for your pupils to live full and independent lives. You have identified that the support your pupils receive to get into employment could be improved. You have introduced internships, work experience and, most impressively, traineeships in local businesses for ex-pupils. The programme that you have established in the post-16 provision is exceptional. Pupils reported how the experience of work has helped them improve their communication and independence. You have adjusted the work of the school to ensure that all pupils are preparing for gainful employment or making a positive contribution to society. As a result, pupils at Stony Dean leave very well prepared for their future, and far more ex-pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities than the national average remain in employment.
- As more pupils with more complex needs join the school, leaders have introduced a more appropriate curriculum in key stages 3 and 4. Pupils are working to the same whole-school objectives to develop communication, independence and social skills, but cover fewer topics. Pupils are making good progress towards their targets because of effective planning and assessment and innovative use of additional adults with specialist expertise. As a result, pupils enjoy learning and are keen to share their achievements.
- The pupil premium grant is used effectively to ensure that disadvantaged pupils achieve similar rates of progress as other pupils in the school. Governors are challenging and passionate in their scrutiny of leaders' work to support disadvantaged pupils. They hold you to account very effectively over the very extensive and varied personalised support that is in place.
- You are rightly concerned about the small number of pupils who struggle to attend school regularly. Leaders have adopted a new and more flexible approach to supporting parents and carers of pupils who have significant social and emotional barriers to attending school. These pupils receive especially well-thought-out support, such as animal therapy and counselling. This new approach is bearing fruit, and those pupils who refused to attend school in the past are now coming to school more regularly.

## **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they develop further their approaches to improve the attendance of those pupils who are currently attending less well.

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

Yours sincerely

Seamus Murphy  
**Ofsted Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

Inspectors met with you, your leadership team, members of the governing body, and staff. An inspector spoke with your school improvement partner. We reviewed documentation, including safeguarding checks, policies, minutes of meetings, procedures, and school planning documentation. We visited all the classes in the school with you and spoke to pupils about their work. We reviewed a sample of pupils' books, both in and outside lessons. Inspectors met with eight pupils at breaktime to get their views of the school. Inspectors visited eight pupils in their work placements and spoke to six post-16 students. We took account of parents' views by speaking to them after school, and considered the 28 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including the free-text responses. We also considered the 24 responses to the pupil questionnaire, and the 45 responses to the staff questionnaire.