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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Andrew Simms
Headteacher
Hazel Oak School
Hazel Oak Road
Shirley
Solihull
West Midlands
B90 2AZ

Dear Mr Simms

Short inspection of Hazel Oak School

Following my visit to the school on 26 March 2019 with Sarah Ashley, 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 February 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of outstanding as a result of this inspection.**

Since the previous inspection, there have been considerable changes to the staffing in the school, including a restructuring of the senior leadership team. You have managed these changes to minimise the impact on pupils' outcomes. Throughout these challenges, you have maintained a strong focus on school improvement. You and your leaders have a precise understanding of the school's current strengths, but also of where key improvements need to be driven more rapidly to ensure that the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes are of the highest quality. For example, there are some inconsistencies in the teaching of writing and in middle leaders' understanding of the quality of provision across their areas.

You and your staff have very high aspirations for all pupils. Pupils said, 'Teachers are prepared to go the extra mile.' They value the care, support and guidance that they receive to help them achieve their full potential. Relationships between pupils and staff are exceptionally positive. Pupils trust their teachers and know that they will be listened to and helped when needed. As a result, pupils are eager to learn and there is a calm and purposeful working atmosphere across the school.

The pastoral care that staff provide for pupils is a key strength of the school. You and your staff have a deep understanding of individual pupils' needs, and you adapt support in response to them. For example, you have developed staff's expertise to meet the growing need for supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health difficulties. This has been very successful. Parents appreciate the way their children are valued by staff. One comment, typical of many expressed by parents, stated, 'Teachers care for all students, and there is a strong sense of family.'

At the time of the previous inspection, leaders were asked to extend support for mainstream schools to improve provision for pupils with learning difficulties and autism spectrum disorder. Your school is part of the Hazel Oak Specialist Teaching Alliance. Through the work of the teaching school, you have developed a range of effective working partnerships to provide support to schools within the local authority and beyond. For example, you have provided schools with training on positive handling and supporting sensory needs, as well as bespoke support to meet each school's specific requirements. This support has successfully enhanced the provision for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools.

Governors are, rightly, exceptionally proud of the hard work and dedication of you and your staff. They are highly supportive, but also act very well as a critical friend to ensure that you and your leaders are continuing to drive school improvement effectively. They have a wide range of expertise and experience to enable them to hold you and other leaders to account for the school's performance. Governors make a strong contribution to the leadership of the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders place a high priority on helping pupils to understand how to keep themselves safe, especially when outside school in the wider community. Staff have a strong understanding of pupils' specific vulnerabilities. They plan and provide many opportunities for pupils to learn about how to avoid potential dangers and how to protect themselves from them. For example, pupils are regularly reminded about how to use the internet safely. Staff also provide workshops for parents to enhance their understanding of how to make sure their children are not exposing themselves to risk when using computers at home. The 'skills for life' programme develops pupils' independent living skills as they progress through the school. This helps to prepare pupils well for life after school.

Leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. All relevant checks are undertaken to ensure that staff and visitors in school pose no risk to pupils. Leaders update staff safeguarding training regularly, and they check that staff understand the training. Staff report all concerns, however small, immediately, and leaders are swift to follow up these concerns. Leaders work with a wide range of external agencies to seek specialist advice and support where needed. They are not afraid to challenge these agencies when they do not feel that the right support is in place to protect pupils from harm. All staff are committed to ensuring that pupils are kept as safe as possible.

Inspection findings

- You and your leaders are highly ambitious for all pupils. You continually seek ways to enhance the provision for those who move into post-16 education.
- You provide pupils from Year 10 with impartial careers information, advice and guidance. Through regular pupil interviews and reviews of their education, health and care (EHC) plans, you prepare them very well for the next stage of their education. While current post-16 provision effectively meets students' needs, you have identified that students would have wider opportunities and choices for post-16 education through developing links with Solihull College. You and your leaders are continuing to explore and develop these links with the college.
- Middle leaders contribute well to the leadership team. For example, they have introduced new approaches to the teaching of mathematics and writing and have further developed the 'challenge curriculum'. They are becoming more involved in monitoring teaching and pupils' outcomes in their subjects. However, this monitoring is at an early stage. Middle leaders do not yet have a sufficiently detailed understanding of the quality of teaching and learning across the whole school in their specific areas of responsibility. Consequently, they are not fully aware of the areas that need further support and development.
- Despite the relative weaknesses in the role of middle leaders, you have developed good systems to monitor the quality of teaching. Through 'joint practice development', teachers take responsibility for, and ownership of, their own professional development. Teachers work together to research and develop key aspects of their teaching skills, such as developing communication and language and therapeutic approaches to support pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. Teachers share their research to enhance the skills of the wider teaching team. Staff appreciate the opportunities they have to develop their own practice.
- You also provide teachers with opportunities to share best practice to further develop the quality of teaching. However, you identify where teaching needs to be improved and are quick to provide more bespoke support when needed. You have a detailed understanding of the key strengths in teaching and learning, but also what needs to be done to raise the overall quality of teaching to the highest standard.
- Leaders have recently introduced a new approach to the teaching of writing. This approach emphasises developing pupils' communication skills and language. Pupils also have a wider range of opportunities to write in different styles. This is helping pupils to write more extended pieces of work. However, the teaching of writing is variable across the school. Some teachers do not ensure that pupils consistently apply basic skills in grammar and punctuation when writing. This limits pupils' overall progress over time.
- You have also recently revised the school's assessment systems. The assessments enable teachers to check closely on how well pupils are progressing and what key skills to plan for next. However, some teachers' confidence and understanding of how to use the assessment systems accurately are still

developing. As a result, some assessments, especially in writing, do not fully reflect pupils' current attainment and progress.

- Leaders have a detailed understanding of pupils' targets in their EHC plans. They have developed 'pupil passports' and 'access to learning sheets' so that these targets are understood by all teachers and staff. Pupils receive a range of individualised support to help them make progress towards their targets. For example, speech and physical therapies are provided directly by the school.
- You and your staff are making every effort to support pupils' individual needs to enable them to meet their targets.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers use the school's assessment systems accurately, especially in writing, to enable them to plan more effectively for pupils' next steps in learning
- teachers secure pupils' understanding and use of basic grammar and punctuation skills in their writing
- middle leaders receive further support and training to help them develop their strategic leadership skills.

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

Yours sincerely

Ann Pritchard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We met with you, the deputy headteachers, the assistant headteachers, the leader of key stages 4 and 5, leaders with subject responsibilities and the Hazel Oak well-being team. Meetings were held with members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. We talked to pupils about their learning, visited lessons across all key stages with you and the deputy headteachers and looked at examples of pupils' work. We observed pupils' behaviour before school, during breaktime and at lunchtime. We spoke to parents and to pupils informally throughout the day. A formal meeting was also held with a group of pupils. We reviewed a range of documentation, including the school's own evaluation of its performance, the school improvement plan, documents relating to keeping pupils safe, pupils' EHC plans and the most recent information about pupils' achievement. We considered the 51 responses on Parent View and the 43 free-text comments from parents. We considered the 21 responses to the staff questionnaire. There were no responses to the pupils' questionnaire.