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Mrs Yvonne Lawson
Teacher in charge
Merit Pupil Referral Service
Willeton Street
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Staffordshire
ST2 9JA

Dear Mrs Lawson

Short inspection of Merit Pupil Referral Service

Following my visit to the school on 9 December 2015 with Graham Tyrer, 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 service was judged to be good in April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

Together with other leaders, staff and governors, you have worked unceasingly to build on Merit's strengths since you took up post just over a year ago. You are all determined that what you provide for the pupils should be of the best quality and tailored to individual needs in order to support both pupils' academic achievement and their well-being. Your overriding ambition is to make sure that pupils leave as well prepared as they can be for their next steps, either back in mainstream school or at college, sixth form or an apprenticeship. To this end, you have amended and strengthened the curriculum so that it closely matches what is offered in secondary schools and have implemented new initiatives, such as the provision of counselling and therapeutic interventions for those who need them.

Your emphasis on the 'three Rs' – responsibility, relationships and resilience – helps maintain the calm, inclusive ethos that pervades Merit. You see the quality of relationships as paramount. It is clear that you and your staff have excellent relationships with one another, with pupils and their families, and with a growing number of health professionals. This means that you are able to understand and respond to pupils' needs quickly and effectively. Your drive for improvement, together with the strong commitment of individual members of staff, have also contributed to substantial improvements in home and personal tuition and the hospital teaching service.

You have dealt successfully with the areas for improvement highlighted at the last inspection. You have made sure that teachers routinely consider how to promote pupils' literacy and numeracy skills when they plan lessons. Observations in classrooms during this visit confirmed that there is a good emphasis on understanding and using technical vocabulary, for example. You now expect teachers to think about how they will incorporate opportunities to reinforce British values and promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development into their lessons. Teachers now follow an agreed policy for marking and feedback to pupils. All staff new to Merit take part in an induction process that makes sure important policies, including for safeguarding, are fully understood.

Merit is commissioned to provide a service for pupils for four-and-a-half days a week. On the remaining half day pupils are typically at home. This means that they are not receiving the full-time education to which they are entitled. This is an historic situation which is not of your making; however, it is not acceptable. While there may be some pupils whose medical or mental health needs mean they cannot manage a full week at school, it is not the case for all of them. In our discussions, you and other senior leaders said how much you would welcome the opportunity to extend your provision to include an additional session and to give pupils their entitlement to a full-time education. You believe that this would help pupils develop greater resilience and prepare them better for their return to mainstream education or their next steps at college.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, other leaders and the governing body have made sure that the arrangements for safeguarding pupils are fit for purpose, and that records are detailed and of high quality. You and your staff work with some of the most vulnerable young people in Stoke. You are all very aware of the need to be vigilant and to be able to identify quickly potential risks and difficulties that the pupils may face. To this end, you have organised additional training for staff on aspects of safeguarding such as trafficking, extremism and child sexual exploitation. You work closely and productively with the local police and other agencies involved in protecting children. You and your staff do not hesitate to act quickly should you suspect a pupil is at risk.

Your daily morning briefing session makes sure that all staff fully understand issues that may have arisen with individual pupils, and that everyone knows what the agreed strategy will be.

You take extra care when recruiting new members of staff and are rigorous in carrying out all of the necessary checks and in following up references.

You also make sure that the pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe through the programme of personal, social and health education and the emphasis that is placed on pupils' well-being. You and the staff work with pupils to develop greater self-esteem and confidence, and to build their resilience in dealing with things that distress them. In addition, pupils can talk about their anxieties and concerns with a counsellor and a psychologist.

You also make sure that any potential risks to staff are identified; for example, when tutors work with individual pupils in their homes.

Inspection findings

- You, the senior team and governors know where the school's strengths lie and what needs to be done to continue to improve. Frequent monitoring activities give you and other leaders a good understanding of what is working well and this ensures that your evaluation of Merit's effectiveness is accurate. The plan for improvement identifies clearly the next steps that need to be taken. How progress in making improvements will be gauged is clearly stated, but the role of the governing body in monitoring the success of the plan is not spelled out.
- The first thing that the pupils said, when we asked what they thought about being at Merit, was that they feel safe. One boy said: 'We are safe here, everyone cares. They look after you well because they know you and they understand how to help you with things that trouble you.'
- When pupils start at Merit, your staff get to know them quickly so that they can tailor the provision sharply to pupils' needs. To this end, pupils complete what you call a 'battery' of assessment activities that gauge not only where they are in their learning but also their social and emotional needs. In addition, individual risk assessments are completed, including for pupils taught in their home or on personalised programmes, to make sure that all staff are fully aware of each pupil's circumstances and needs.
- Good teaching that takes account of individual needs means that pupils typically settle down and begin to make good progress in their learning. Many make rapid progress and narrow the gap substantially on where they should be, taking their prior attainment at the age of seven or 11 into account. Last year, all of the students in Year 11 left Merit with at least one GCSE pass. Several achieved highly; four students gained at least 5 GCSE passes at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, and a further three gained at least five passes at grades A* to G, including English and mathematics. All of last year's Year 11 pupils gained the place they wanted at college, sixth form or an apprenticeship. Staff from Merit have kept in touch with these young people and have offered support to help them stay at their placement, should they need it.
- Pupils who spoke to inspectors had high expectations of themselves. They mentioned careers in nursing, teaching, social work and architecture as possible options. They knew that if they wanted to pursue their choice of career that they would have to work hard and gain as many good GCSE passes as they could. You and the staff at Merit offer good guidance to help them towards their ambitions. As further encouragement, the stairwell contains a display of photographs of last year's leavers together with the qualifications they gained and what they are doing now.
- Although overall attendance is below the national figure for secondary schools, records show that most pupils' attendance improves markedly

once they start at Merit. Some pupils said that they had hardly attended their secondary school at all, but were now in Merit every day.

- Pupils usually behave very well in lessons and around the building. In lessons during this inspection, pupils concentrated well on their work and showed some interest and enthusiasm. Your records show that there are still times when pupils become stressed and their behaviour deteriorates. To help manage this, staff have completed training in how best to defuse potentially aggressive situations and keep pupils safe. Incidents of restraint and fixed-term exclusions have reduced considerably as a result.
- Staff go to great lengths to support and motivate individual pupils. This includes celebrating small successes that are part of a longer-term goal. One parent said how pleased she was that her son had received a certificate for attendance at a celebration assembly, even though he is still a long way away from 100% attendance. To get to his current attendance rate was a huge step forward for a pupil who was reluctant to go to school at all a few months ago.
- The parents who spoke to us said how much they appreciated being consulted and included in decision making. They said that they felt welcome, and spoke with great feeling about the positive impact that attending Merit has had on their children. Similarly, written comments from parents of children in hospital were universally positive about the attention to their children's needs.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should work with the local authority to ensure that:

- all pupils are better prepared to return to mainstream education or to move on to college, by making sure they receive their entitlement to ten sessions of education each week
- the plan for improvement is strengthened by specifying more clearly the role of the governing body in checking its success.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, the inspectors held discussions with leaders, other staff, the Chair of the Governing Body, pupils, a group of parents and a representative of the local authority. One inspector visited the hospital provision. The other inspector

visited classrooms at Merit and observed pupils at lunchtime. A number of documents were scrutinised, including records of behaviour and attendance, the self-evaluation and plan for improvement, case studies of individual pupils and information related to safeguarding, including on Merit's website. There were too few responses on Ofsted's Parent View website to be viewed, but as well as meeting a group of parents, the inspectors took account of written comments from parents at the hospital site and one further written comment from a parent that was received during the inspection.