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Mrs Joanna Jones
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Dear Mrs Jones

Short inspection of Northern House School

Following my visit to the school on 1 March 2016 with Joanna Yates, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be outstanding in July 2012.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school. Leaders, staff and governors told the inspection team that the school has improved further since the last inspection. The school continues to go from strength to strength under your leadership. One parent commented, 'This school has been amazing for my child.'

There is no sense that the school is standing still and certainly no complacency. You have identified that more pupils with complex difficulties, such as autistic spectrum conditions, speech and language difficulties and attachment disorders are now attending the school than at the time of the previous inspection in 2012. You and your team of staff have responded with intelligence and determination, and developed the culture of the school to suit the pupils' needs. As a result, pupils leave the school with even better outcomes in academic achievement, behaviour and personal well-being.

Leaders and staff are highly accountable for the work they do. You have ensured that sufficient time is spent examining pupils' rates of progress and improvements in their behaviour. A drive to learn and develop skills and expertise in the field of special education is actively encouraged for all staff. For example, the substantive deputy headteacher is currently on sabbatical leave while pursuing specialist

research. This has provided valuable opportunities for other leaders to step up to senior posts and develop their skills. You are developing further the roles and responsibilities of senior and middle leaders in monitoring and improving the outcomes for pupils. Staff feel inspired and empowered to pursue their educational interests and develop themselves, but know that they are supported personally as well as professionally.

Pupils learn exceptionally well and make excellent progress. They leave for secondary special or mainstream schools in a strong position to take their next steps. Since the previous inspection, the end of key stage results have continued to improve, with some recent notable successes for the most-able pupils. You and your leadership team are determined that, where appropriate, pupils should have the same opportunities to take national tests and assessments. This is in order for them to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their peers in mainstream schools. Highly effective teaching and a range of extra help assures rapid progress for those pupils who have much lower starting points. In all, pupils achieve much more than might have been predicted because of the high quality of care and nurture received to improve their behaviour, minimise their anxieties and restore their confidence.

Pupils' attendance, behaviour and emotional well-being improve significantly over the time they are at the school. They settle down extremely well, are eager to learn and participate in school life. Pupils soon learn useful strategies to help them keep calm and in control of their feelings and fears. They feel safe in school, value the help they receive and are confident in staff. One pupil told an inspector, 'Teachers here know what they are doing.' Another commented, 'Staff really care about you.'

School leaders took concerted action to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection. The school now looks outwards; the integration and outreach team provide expertise, training and hands-on practical help to schools and individual pupils all around the county. In addition, the school is rapidly acquiring a reputation as a centre of excellence for managing and improving behaviour and developing pupils' social and emotional well-being.

The school is a safe, happy, nurturing and ambitious place to learn for pupils and for staff.

Safeguarding is effective.

Checks on staff working in the school are thorough and up to date. Leaders and staff are highly vigilant and report any concerns about pupils promptly, putting the needs of the child first. Staff know pupils and families extremely well and work closely with them and other agencies, which supports pupils potentially at risk of harm.

Records related to safeguarding are kept in an orderly manner. They are detailed, with a useful overview and chronology at the front of files which summarises concerns. It is clear that the school does all it can to obtain crucial support and intervention from other agencies in order to protect pupils.

Pupils are adamant that they feel safe in school. Pupils told inspectors that they had received useful guidance about keeping safe when using the internet or online and that they are supported to keep safe on trips and visits.

Inspection findings

- Communication between leaders and staff, pupils and parents is excellent. In addition to scheduled briefings, appraisal meetings and formal discussions about pupils' progress, staff also benefit from one-to-one sessions and supervision. Opportunities to share concerns help to foster a healthy and happy working atmosphere.
- Senior leaders provide clear direction. Staff know what they are aiming for as a school and share a common purpose. One staff member said, 'We strive to give all of our pupils opportunities they may never have had or struggled to achieve.'
- Warm and respectful relationships between staff and pupils are clearly evident right from the beginning of the day with the friendly and purposeful breakfast time which prepares everyone calmly for the day ahead.
- Orderly and courteous behaviour in assembly also helps to set the tone for learning. News and information are shared with pupils, which makes them feel involved in the day-to-day running of the school. Key messages about behaviour and thoughtfulness reinforce the school's values.
- Close supervision of pupils throughout the day promotes their positive behaviour. For older pupils and those who are making transitions to new schools, staff rightly plan more opportunities for pupils to manage their own behaviour without needing so much direction.
- Pupils benefit from well-planned lessons to interest and challenge them. Teachers do not underestimate what pupils are capable of doing. They make sure that pupils think deeply, debate difficult ideas and take part in practical activities.
- Pupils are encouraged to read challenging books, learn to play musical instruments and produce superb art work just as they would in mainstream schools.
- Pupils rise to the challenges set by their teachers and make the most of the opportunities they are given. They are earnest about learning: they try hard and are keen to please staff. They appreciate their environment and do not take long to adapt to the school's routines and expectations.
- Pupils' behaviour improves over time. They learn to manage their emotions and the number of serious incidents declines. The school has well-trained staff to support pupils with behavioural difficulties and clearly identifiable 'safe spaces' in the school help to restore calm. The 'safe spaces' are open areas off corridors, deliberately designed without doors so that pupils feel enclosed and secure, but not confined. Staff maintain a watching brief and are on hand to provide reassurance and to help get pupils back on track with their learning.

- Pupils value the school's reward system and are enthusiastic about earning credits for their good conduct and progress. They know that if they continue to behave well and work hard, their points accumulate quickly and convert to small prizes. In this way, pupils have a tangible reward, linked precisely to their improving behaviour and achievement.
- A key strength of the school is the contribution made by teaching assistants and other adults working with pupils. Teaching assistants add considerable value to pupils' learning and personal development; they think on their feet and sensitively support pupils' positive behaviour with unobtrusive and prompt reminders. Under the direction of the teacher, teaching assistants take responsibility for teaching segments of lessons, which clearly helps pupils to catch up.
- Pupils make excellent progress in reading. They enjoy books and the experience of sharing and discussing stories. A recent focus on phonics (sounds that letters make) has improved pupils' confidence when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. Books studied in lessons have challenging themes and topics. As a result, pupils' understanding of other cultures increases and their spiritual and moral development is enhanced.
- Pupils sometimes struggle with writing, but their books demonstrate that they make rapid progress with composing sentences, forming correct letters and neatening their handwriting.
- Pupils enjoy and often excel in mathematics, achieving results that compare well with those of pupils with similar starting points. A growing strength of the school curriculum is science. Pupils very much enjoy doing practical experiments, predicting results and learning about the world around them.
- There are no gaps in the achievement of different groups. The number of girls in the school is comparatively small, but this is no hindrance. Girls achieve well and are happy and secure.
- Disadvantaged pupils achieve as well as other pupils and make excellent progress. The pupil premium funding is spent appropriately to close gaps. However, school leaders have correctly identified that they would like to analyse the pupil premium spending even more closely to determine exactly what makes the most difference for individual pupils.
- Nearly all parents are extremely happy with the quality of education provided by the school. The school's own survey of parents and Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, show clearly that most parents would recommend the school. Parents who sent comments to Ofsted were universally positive about the changes in their children as a result of their placement at the school. For example, a parent said, 'My child now looks forward to coming to school, enjoys lessons and is gaining confidence in his abilities every day.'
- Members of the local governing body and the Northern House School Academy Trust have every confidence in the leadership of the school, share school leaders' ambitions and are diligent about their governance duties. Support for the school leaders is finely balanced with incisive questions and close scrutiny of outcomes for pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- senior and middle leaders fully establish their roles and share some of the responsibility for monitoring and continuing to improve outcomes for pupils
- pupil premium spending is evaluated even more precisely by its impact on pupils' academic and personal progress.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Local Governing Body, the Chief Executive of the Northern House School Academy Trust, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, the acting deputy headteachers, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Chief Executive of the Northern House School Academy Trust, a group of staff and a group of pupils. An inspector spoke to one of the leaders of the integration and outreach team on the telephone. Inspectors visited all classes to observe teaching and learning, to speak to pupils informally and to view their work. An inspector observed breaktime activities. Thirteen contributions to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and seven comments from parents were taken into account, along with the school's own survey of parents' views. A complaint about the school from a parent was also considered alongside other evidence. The inspection team also considered the 28 responses to the online staff survey and six comments from staff. No pupils responded to the pupil questionnaire.

A range of documentation was reviewed, including the school's self-evaluation and development plan, vetting checks on staff working in the school and other records related to safeguarding. Inspectors checked behaviour logs, the school's analysis of attendance and case histories related to serious behaviour incidents. Information about pupils' progress and attainment was also evaluated.