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Gill Rennard
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Rennard

Short inspection of Whitstone

Following my visit to the school on 9 February 2017 with Ofsted Inspector Martin Watson, 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 February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. You and other leaders have promoted a strong ethos that stimulates high expectations, manners and a pride in all aspects of learning, which is evident throughout the school. Leaders are focusing successfully on developing pupils' positive attitudes to learning, and consequently encouraging good progress. The work of the school has been enhanced by the governing body, which has challenged and supported you to make improvements.

Leaders across the school, at all levels, have worked with success to improve the life chances of pupils. As recommended in the previous inspection, this has included ensuring that pupils have good competences in reading, writing and other communication skills, and good numeracy skills. As pupils have improved these skills, they have become more resilient learners.

You have placed much emphasis on developing pupils' skills so that they are able to make the best of the opportunities offered to them. There is a mutual benefit in the mentoring programmes in which older pupils develop their own skills, while helping younger pupils. Pupils of different ages get on well together.

Actions taken since the previous inspection have also included developing the expertise of teachers. This has helped them focus on targeting teaching activities to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities. Pupils are encouraged to think more deeply about their work and we saw evidence of this in pupils' books, and in some

considered responses made to teachers' questions in classrooms.

Pupils talked to inspectors about enjoying their time at school, and they were clear that they feel safe and well looked after. The school works successfully to promote good health, and physical and mental well-being. Leaders recognise that this is important for the development of pupils into successful learners and young adults.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's leaders have developed a strong culture of keeping pupils safe from harm. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Thorough checks are made to ensure that employees, volunteers and any other visitors to the school are suitable to work with children. If any matter requires further action, it is followed up quickly by working with the appropriate authorities.

The link governor for safeguarding is particularly active in assuring that the school meets all its statutory duties. An appropriate level of training is given to all members of staff. Pupils are well informed about the things that they can do to keep themselves safe. They confirm that they feel confident about keeping themselves safe from harm, such as when using the internet.

The school has effective systems to monitor the well-being and safety of all pupils. Leaders have worked diligently to comply with their responsibilities under the government's 'Prevent' duty, and are working to further extend opportunities to educate pupils in this respect.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry concerned rates of attendance and exclusions. The school's leaders have worked hard to improve the attendance of all pupils and overall attendance is now in line with the national average. The attendance rates of pupils who are entitled to free school meals and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have also improved. Nevertheless, they are not yet as good as that of other pupils.
- The school has worked successfully to support pupils who may otherwise exhibit challenging behaviour, and consequently the sanction of permanent exclusion has not been necessary for the past two years, a significant improvement. The incidence of fixed-term exclusions has also fallen, and continues to reduce. Inspectors observed high standards of conduct throughout the school, and this is endorsed by the views expressed by parents. Members of staff were clear that the management of pupils' positive behaviour is good at all levels.
- A second line of enquiry related to the progress pupils make, especially disadvantaged pupils. Recognising that disadvantaged pupils have not always achieved as well as they should in the past, the school is now successfully addressing the issue. The skills and knowledge of disadvantaged pupils throughout the school indicate that they are making the progress expected of other pupils of their age. Leaders have ensured that support staff receive

appropriate training, for example in helping disadvantaged pupils to develop emotional literacy and core skills to boost their progress.

- In 2016, GCSE examination results showed that pupils made progress broadly in line with the national average. Much of school leaders' work to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils was successful in helping them to make similar progress to other pupils nationally, but there remained a difference in the progress of disadvantaged pupils in English. In mathematics, however, the same group of disadvantaged pupils made progress which was in line with the national group of other pupils.
- For those younger pupils who have not yet mastered the basic skills in English and mathematics, effective support helps them to catch up. Working more closely with local primary schools is also helping to improve teaching. There is now a common use of language and approach. The school provides a challenging curriculum for the most able pupils. This includes, for example, pupils in the 'express group' in key stage 4 who study triple science GCSE qualifications. Pupils' confidence and aspirations have been raised in other ways, for example by working on projects with sponsorship from universities.
- The school's leaders are aware that in the past middle-ability boys have not always made strong progress. The school has put in place actions designed to build boys' confidence in reading and writing skills. Inspectors saw evidence that there are benefits emerging. For example, boys are now writing more extensively in English and they are reading a wider range of literature. The school is continuing to encourage boys to raise their aspirations by working with local businesses. There is capacity to expand this aspect of the school's work.
- The school's ethos of high expectations is evident in pupils' work. We looked at a wide range of work, particularly from disadvantaged pupils. The school places high emphasis on developing positive attitudes to learning. Pupils take pride in their work and generally try hard to complete it to the best of their ability. Pupils usually follow the advice given by their teachers and actively make attempts to improve their work.
- My third line of enquiry was assessing the impact of the teaching of literacy. The school's leaders have driven improvements in literacy and communication skills across all subjects with good effect. Inspectors heard pupils reading aloud with confidence in English lessons. You explained that 'reading focus weeks' encourage pupils to read more widely, but you are not sure exactly what the impact is. We saw that pupils present their work with attention to correct spelling and grammar, and it is clear that the majority are able to develop extended written responses to questions. Good attention is being given to developing vocabulary, but punctuation is not as well developed. These actions are helping pupils to prepare for the new requirements for GCSE examinations.
- My final line of enquiry concerned the quality of careers education that pupils receive. The curriculum provides a broad and balanced experience for pupils, allowing them to gain a range of appropriate qualifications to equip them for the next stage of their lives. Older pupils told inspectors that they feel well informed and advised in making their decisions about the next stage of their development after they leave this school. The school has close links with a local further

education college and pupils explained that they value the opportunities to sample courses there on 'taster days'. In key stage 4, all pupils benefit from individual careers advice interviews where comprehensive and impartial information is given. This helps pupils to make informed choices about their next steps.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they sharpen their evaluation of the impact of interventions on pupils' progress so that they know precisely how effective each action is
- the attendance of pupils continues to improve, especially for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
- they further develop strategies across all curriculum areas to further improve literacy and other communication 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 Somerset. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ann Cox
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors observed learning in classrooms accompanied by members of the school's senior leadership team. We looked at pupils' work, and talked to them about their learning. During English lessons, inspectors listened to pupils reading aloud. We also observed pupils' behaviour around the school at movement- and breaktimes. Inspectors looked in detail at samples of pupils' work to assess progress over time. Each inspector met with a tutor group, each group including pupils from all year groups of the school. Meetings were held with senior leaders and other members of staff. I met with three members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. We looked at a wide range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors looked carefully at the school's records and analyses of information about pupils' progress, and also their attendance and behaviour. Inspectors also took into account 23 responses to Parent View and 18 responses to the staff survey.