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Mrs Sian Bailey
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Dear Mrs Bailey

Short inspection of Blackmarston School

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 2017 with Chris Field, 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 good in September 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Staff at all levels work together effectively to ensure that Blackmarston School is a calm and friendly place where pupils do well both socially and educationally. Staff make a difference to the lives of pupils and their families. One parent spoke for many when they said, 'My son is happy, confident and thriving. He is well understood. The staff embrace both child and family.' Another parent added, 'Having a child with special needs puts a lot of pressure on families. Blackmarston has given us so much support not only to my daughter but to us as a family.'

Staff are sensitive to pupils' needs, abilities and aptitudes. They work effectively with therapists to make sure that they overcome pupils' barriers to learning. Teachers and teaching assistants carefully tailor learning to meet pupils' needs. As a result, the vast majority of pupils make good progress from their starting points and develop a wide range of learning and life skills such as personal hygiene, resilience and perseverance.

Staff develop pupils' confidence and self-esteem well through participation in a range of activities and therapies such as forest school, hydrotherapy and physiotherapy. One parent commented, 'It is an exemplary school that goes the extra mile when it comes to problem-solving and to working with other agencies and professionals.'

You have successfully addressed the vast majority of areas for improvement identified in your previous inspection in September 2013.

You and your staff have worked successfully to improve aspects of teaching that were weaker at the time of the previous inspection. Teachers and teaching assistants set work and activities for the most able pupils that provide challenge. This includes improving the most able pupils' reading and writing skills. Staff's highly effective questioning develops pupils' ability to describe and write about what they have read. As a result, this group of pupils are writing more independently and reading more fluently and with an improving understanding of what they have read.

You and your staff have had a 'big push' on writing which has included staff training, working in collaboration with parents and ensuring that teaching approaches carefully match the needs of pupils. Pupils who do not have the necessary fine motor skills to write using a pen and paper have opportunities to write using different media, for example by using signs, writing in sand or other materials, or by using computer software that changes symbols or the spoken word into text. Indeed, staff use a range of computer technology highly effectively to improve pupils' learning. The most able pupils' independent writing is well developed. Staff gradually, carefully and appropriately reduce the support pupils receive so that they can increasingly write unaided and independently. Staff use a range of methods to provide stimulus for pupils' writing. Pupils write for different purposes and audiences and about their experiences during trips or activities such as those to the forest school or a local observatory. Staff use phonics teaching to develop pupils' reading and writing skills effectively. They do this through helping pupils to sound out commonly used and unfamiliar words and to use these skills in spelling these words when writing.

Pupils develop their mathematical knowledge and understanding through effective teaching and support. Staff successfully use a range of resources and equipment to develop pupils' understanding of basic arithmetical, algebraic and geometrical concepts. Pupils investigate how mathematics works by solving increasingly difficult problems and by exploring mathematics in the world around them. As a consequence, pupils use and apply their developing mathematical skills confidently and efficiently and make good progress from their starting points.

Since the previous inspection, you have adapted and refined the curriculum so that the range of subjects and activities and extra-curricular opportunities actively promote and support pupils' learning and progress. Staff deliver the curriculum effectively as they have secure subject knowledge, expertise in providing for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and a clear understanding of their pupils' needs. However, recently you and your staff identified that the provision for those pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties was not fully meeting their needs and changes were needed.

Your assessment procedures focus on the steps you expect each pupil to make in their learning and social and physical development. As a result, staff know exactly how well their pupils are doing. They use this information successfully to plan

lessons, intervention and support that meet the needs of individual pupils. You and governors use the information about pupils' progress to monitor staffs' performance and to hold them to account successfully. However, you recognise that leaders could use this assessment information more effectively to identify trends and patterns that would help inform future strategies and actions.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, your staff and governors give safeguarding and child protection the highest priority. The school's arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils are highly effective. As the designated safeguarding leader, you demonstrate a thorough and comprehensive understanding of current government guidance. You have the necessary knowledge and expertise to carry out this role well. As a result, child protection records are detailed, of a good quality and securely kept. Pupils are safe and cared for well. Parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire agree. One parent commented, 'Blackmarston School is a fantastic environment that brings learning to my child in a safe and protective environment.'

Staff training is frequent and focused on the risks and safeguarding issues that are most relevant to the needs of the pupils and their families. As a result, staff are vigilant and proactively identify potential child protection issues such as physical abuse or neglect. All of the staff who responded to the inspection questionnaire agreed that pupils are safe and that any bullying is dealt with quickly and effectively.

The checks on staff's suitability to work with children are comprehensive and recorded well. The administration staff have a secure understanding of current government guidance and apply this expertise to ensuring that staff's personnel files reflect the information contained in the school's record of checks.

Pupils' understanding of right and wrong and what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate touching, use of the internet, language and behaviour is well developed. Staff achieve this through a wide-ranging personal, social, health and economic education programme, assemblies, educational visits and guest speakers, such as the police. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that they feel safe and secure in school and that staff help them if they are anxious, upset or troubled.

Inspection findings

- You and your senior team have an accurate picture of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. You and your staff reflect constantly on how to improve pupils' educational experiences. You recently evaluated the provision for pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties and found that this group of pupils did not do as well as they could. As a result, you changed the class structure and staffing. The early signs are that your changes are having a positive influence on pupils' progress.
- Staff are highly skilled in developing pupils' communication and interaction skills through the school's 'total communication environment'. This is a strength of the

school. Staff across the school consistently use non-verbal prompts such as signing, pictures, objects and symbols to improve pupils' understanding and their ability to express feelings, emotions or thoughts. Staff make sure that the learning environment is conducive to helping pupils communicate. For example, staff carefully monitor the lighting and noise levels in rooms to make sure pupils are not overstimulated or distracted.

- Governors have a broad range of appropriate knowledge and skills. They carry out the vast majority of their roles and responsibilities effectively. They frequently monitor and evaluate the school's effectiveness. They have a clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and suitably challenge leaders' assertions about the quality of provision. However, leaders, including governors are not making enough use of assessment information to identify any trends in results that could then lead to further improvements to provision. Governors have not made sure that the school's website fully complies with current government guidance. For example, the details on the website about the school's curriculum do not accurately reflect what happens in the school.
- The vast majority of disadvantaged pupils make the same, and often better, progress than other pupils. You use the pupil premium funding effectively to focus support and therapies on improving pupils' learning and their social and life skills. Governors have a secure understanding of how effectively you use the funding. However, they have not made sure that they record their evaluation in the pupil premium funding report on the school's website.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders evaluate the information on pupils' progress in such a way that they are able to identify trends that can inform subsequent practice
- there is careful evaluation of the progress made by pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties following the recent changes to the provision for them
- the school's website fully complies with current government guidance
- the governors' analysis of the pupil premium spending is included in the school's report on the pupil premium.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter Humphries
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

To explore the quality of provision provided by the school, inspectors:

- met with you, your deputy headteacher and members of the governing body including the chair
- met with a representative of the local authority
- considered the views of parents from the 13 written responses to the parents' inspection questionnaire and the 28 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire
- heard pupils read
- spoke to pupils formally and informally about their learning and school experiences
- met with staff formally and informally to discuss the school's progress since the previous inspection
- considered the views of staff from the 43 responses to the inspection questionnaire
- scrutinised a number of school documents including the school's self-evaluation documents; safeguarding records, policies and procedures including the checks on staff's suitability to work with children; and information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance
- visited lessons across the school with you and your deputy headteacher
- scrutinised a number of pupils' books across a range of subjects.