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Mrs Lorna Lyons
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Lyons

Short inspection of Gillingham School

Following my visit to the school on 11 July 2017 with Stuart Ingram, 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 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and other senior leaders have high aspirations for pupils because you want the very best for them. Consequently, you lead with purpose and determination. Other staff are also expected to demonstrate these qualities in their work. They are happy to do so because staff share the view that the pupils are at the heart of the school's work. Middle leaders appreciate the trust placed in them by senior leaders to do their jobs. They feel encouraged to take risks and invest in their professional development. This approach helps staff to take pride in their work and responsibility for their career progression. As you put it, 'We believe in growing our own.'

Leaders are well supported by governors, who are passionately committed to the school. They are knowledgeable about many aspects of the school's work and bring a range of experience and expertise to the full board. Governors are increasingly providing robust challenge to senior leaders. However, they would be assisted further in this work if they had a more detailed understanding of achievement information.

Leaders, governors and the wider staff have nurtured a school culture in which pupils are known as individuals, in spite of the school's large size. They feel valued because the school's ethos is inclusive and recognises that everyone is different. One governor commented to me, 'We put the child first.' Pupils also reported that they are well cared for, enjoy their school experience and feel comfortable. One

pupil told me, 'school is a fun and safe environment'. Furthermore, you have a strong, productive relationship with nearly all your parents, who are supportive of your efforts to improve the school. The vast majority of parents who responded to the online survey Parent View would recommend the school and agree that it is well led.

Leaders' high expectations and commitment to staff professional development are improving the consistency of teaching across the school. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan interesting, challenging and engaging activities. Consequently, pupils respond well to teaching. For example, in one observed history lesson the teacher engaged Year 10 pupils in an interesting class discussion. The discussion focused on how conventional understanding of medicine was challenged by Vesalius in the 16th century. Pupils were interested and wanted to find out more.

Pupils' behaviour is good in lessons because of the quality of teaching. They listen attentively to their teachers, follow instructions promptly and settle to tasks quickly and conscientiously. No low-level disruption was observed during the inspection. Pupils' behaviour is equally good outside of lessons around the school site at breaktimes. They are pleasant, friendly and courteous. Pupils treat each other and adults with consideration and respect.

At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed on the key lines of enquiry to be considered during the day. These included establishing the effectiveness of actions taken to raise achievement for pupils across the curriculum, particularly pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. We also considered the quality of pupils' welfare, including establishing whether attendance is improving and exclusions falling. Finally, we considered whether safeguarding is effective. These lines of enquiry are considered below under 'Safeguarding' and 'Inspection findings' where they have not already been referred to.

Safeguarding is effective.

The designated safeguarding lead, supported by the wider team, is proactive and tenacious in his work. He ensures that appropriate systems are in place to protect vulnerable pupils and monitors them closely. All staff are given appropriate child protection training and know whom to speak to should they have any concerns about a child. Referrals are securely kept online and well organised so that the chronology of events is clear. This enables staff to take prompt, effective action to keep pupils safe. The safeguarding team knows these pupils well. Staff liaise effectively with external agencies and are persistent in their efforts to secure the support that pupils need. Checks to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children are up to date and complete. Staff and governors involved in recruitment are also appropriately trained to ensure that staff joining the school are suitable.

The large school site is increasingly secure because leaders have reviewed provision and made changes accordingly. Consequently, gates that have not been fit for purpose have been replaced. Moreover, CCTV has been installed and the site supervision team 'keep a close eye' on the site's perimeter.

Pupils who spoke with the team inspector and me reported that they feel safe in school. This is because there are numerous staff they would happily talk to if they had concerns or worries. One pupil who spoke with me said, 'The staff make it [school] feel safe.'

Inspection findings

- Leaders conducted a sharp and accurate analysis of the achievement of pupils who took GCSE examinations in 2016. As a result, they identified areas of underachievement and took swift, effective action to tackle the underlying causes.
- Current pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making good progress comparable with their peers. This is because staff are more closely monitoring their progress and providing timely intervention when necessary to help them catch up.
- The curriculum is a strength of the school. A wide selection of subjects are available for pupils and they are encouraged to follow courses that meet their needs and interests.
- Leaders have made it a priority to increase the number of pupils achieving the highest grades. Consequently, the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, are experiencing a greater degree of challenge in their lessons.
- The work of pupils of different abilities shows that they are making good progress in their different subjects. In English, pupils are provided with helpful opportunities to practise their extended writing skills. They use teachers' encouraging advice to help them improve their work. However, some pupils do not take enough pride in their work for some subjects because presentation is not as neat as it could be.
- The school's strong pastoral team, including heads of year, ensures that pupils receive the care they need. Pupils report that their pastoral needs are met. Additionally, the large majority of parents who responded to the online survey Parent View agree that their child is well looked after.
- Pupils report that bullying is rare. When it does occur, they say that it is dealt with effectively. One pupil told me, 'School snuffs it out quickly.'
- Absence is still too high for certain groups of pupils, despite the school's efforts to tackle this. Leaders have raised the profile of attendance, monitor it closely and work hard to ensure that parents understand the importance of good attendance. Nevertheless, persistent absence is still too high for some pupils.
- Overall exclusions are in line with the national average, although they are higher than average for disadvantaged pupils. Exclusions for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have fallen over time. As external support diminishes, leaders continue to look for other ways to tackle rare examples of high-level misbehaviour before resorting to exclusion. These methods are proving to be successful in some cases, but not all.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- action continues to be taken to improve the attendance of pupils who are persistently absent
- governors sharpen their understanding of attainment and progress information to better hold leaders to account
- all pupils take pride in the presentation of their work.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, the team inspector and I spoke to you and other senior leaders. We also spoke to representatives of the governing body, pupils, members of the designated safeguarding team, the special needs coordinator, the head of the sixth form and an external adviser from Dorset County Council.

The team inspector and I made visits to lessons with members of staff to observe pupils' attitudes to learning. We also scrutinised the work in pupils' books.

A range of documentary evidence was considered, which included the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan, as well as records of behaviour, attendance and exclusion. I also considered governing body minutes and notes of a visit from external advisers. Additionally, I scrutinised various safeguarding records, including those relating to the suitability of staff to work with children.

I took account of 190 responses to the Parent View online survey.