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Mr Matt Sambrook
Headteacher
Exeter House Special School
Somerset Road
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Dear Mr Sambrook

Short inspection of Exeter House Special School

Following my visit to the school on 14 September 2017 with Ofsted Inspector John White, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. This visit was the first short inspection carried out since your predecessor school was judged to be good in May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Starting in post at the beginning of this term, it is impressive how you have rapidly gained the respect of your team and built positive relationships with the pupils. Your drive, passion and determination for the school to offer the very best quality of education and care to the pupils it serves shine through. Indeed, governors describe how the school is currently on a 'launch pad' as a result of leaders' aspirations for it to be outstanding.

You are ably supported by your senior leaders, who share your vision for the school and eagerness for it to be the very best. Their leadership is very much respected and valued by staff.

Through accurate self-evaluation you, senior leaders and governors possess a clear knowledge of the school's strengths and are fully aware of what needs to improve, for example, the need to distribute leadership within the school to enable a clear line of monitoring and accountability to secure the best possible progress for pupils. In addition, you know that your most-able pupils are not yet fulfilling their academic potential. You are rapidly securing detailed and robust development plans for how these areas are going to be quickly and effectively resolved.

Staff know pupils extremely well and have an unwavering dedication to meeting their academic and pastoral needs. This was exemplified by staff describing how

they consider their job to be a vocation and enjoy coming to school each day. As a result, pupils continue to thrive and make strong progress.

Most parents speak positively about the school and are highly supportive. However, some express how they would welcome better communication with the school. They would like to have a clearer understanding of how the actions the school takes impact on their child's learning and development. Nevertheless, there were also many favourable comments such as, 'This is an amazing school, amazing teachers, I couldn't be happier with Exeter House, it is fantastic', 'The resources and provision are exemplary' and 'It is a great school, we are very happy with all that it has to offer'.

At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed on the key lines of enquiry to be considered during the day. These included: how the school ensures that pupils are safe; the effectiveness of leaders in ensuring that pupils make good progress; how teaching enables pupils to learn well; and how leaders, including governors, ensure that staff are supported well in their role. These key lines of enquiry are considered below under 'safeguarding' and 'inspection findings'.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, your staff and governors take a rigorous and consistent approach to safeguarding. The nature of your school means that all pupils are vulnerable in a variety of ways. There is a clear culture that safeguarding is everybody's responsibility and staff, whatever their role, recognise the need to be vigilant at all times. Leaders are relentless in ensuring that they provide an environment where pupils feel safe and secure. Clear and well-understood procedures ensure that adults know how to refer concerns within school and to outside agencies. Leaders meticulously monitor pupils and are assiduous in following up any concerns, not hesitating to escalate concerns should the need arise.

You, other leaders and governors ensure that all safeguarding records are detailed and of high quality. You ensure that staff receive timely and appropriate training on keeping pupils safe. This provides them with the knowledge and skills to identify concerns and take rapid action with confidence.

Leaders, including governors, have a clear understanding of the importance of recruiting safely. The records of checks on staff are comprehensive and accurate. Risk assessments are in place for activities undertaken and for individual pupils. Leaders are diligent to make sure they remain fit for purpose.

The supportiveness of relationships between staff and pupils is striking. Consequently, pupils report that they are happy and feel safe during their time in school. They describe how staff look after them and support them in tackling any of their worries or concerns. Pupils are aware of what constitutes bullying. They told inspectors that it rarely happens and when it does it is quickly tackled by staff. Consequently, pupils enjoy their time in school, which is evident in their regular attendance.

Inspection findings

- Governors and staff talk with delight about securing your appointment as headteacher of Exeter House Special School. You are highly ambitious for the school and in securing the best outcomes for pupils. Senior leaders, staff and governors share your determination to drive forward improvements. Therefore, the capacity of leaders at the school is strong.
- You have wasted no time in communicating your vision for the school, clearly articulating your high expectations and aspirations. You have rapidly established yourself within the school and quickly set about working with staff to realise the vision.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have worked tirelessly to provide high-quality education and care for pupils. The quality of teaching and learning identified as an area for improvement has been successfully tackled. Consequently, pupils achieve well and make good progress from often extremely low starting points.
- Leaders monitor the quality of provision to ensure that teaching and learning are consistently strong. All staff know each pupil extremely well and are acutely aware of their highly complex needs. Information on what pupils know, can do and understand is used effectively to provide bespoke learning activities which precisely meet their needs. The curriculum covers a wide range of subjects and learning experiences for pupils.
- There is a strong focus on the core skills of reading, writing and mathematics. Younger pupils were animated in their English work on 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. They were able to name characters and with support accurately sequence the story. Writing by older pupils about their experience at the Oceanarium in Bournemouth clearly demonstrates their developing writing skills. In addition, there is a strong focus on developing life skills. This was exemplified on a visit by inspectors to the new post-16 provision. Students were engrossed in a range of activities such as horticulture, cooking and needlework. Students making patchwork cushions for sale could clearly demonstrate their needlework skills, quickly get to grips with the mechanics of a sewing machine and use them effectively to independently produce high-quality work. Nevertheless, you are correct in identifying the need to make sure your most-able pupils are successful in reaching their academic potential.
- Staff appreciate the opportunities afforded to them to develop their practice. They welcome the guidance given by leaders and the training they are able to attend to further develop their teaching skills. Middle leaders describe how they are effectively developing their leadership roles as a result of training they have undertaken. However, you are aware that more work needs to be undertaken to ensure that leadership at all levels is accountable for the quality of education pupils receive.
- Staff, irrespective of their role, describe how they are well supported by leaders and governors. They describe the approachability of leaders and how they are able to share any worries or concerns they may have, confident that they will be well supported. They particularly comment on the pastoral support they receive

from leaders when working with children who have significant and often extremely complex needs. This enables them to effectively carry out their roles, and provide pupils with a good quality of education and care.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leadership is distributed appropriately within the school so that monitoring and accountability are effective in securing the best possible outcomes for pupils
- the most able pupils fulfil their academic potential
- communication for parents is strengthened so that they receive timely information that explains clearly the rationale of actions taken by leaders in the school and the impact they have on the quality of education and care their children are receiving.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the multi academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Wiltshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jen Southall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We met with you and your senior leaders. Together, we talked about the improvements that have been made since the last inspection. We observed the start of the day when pupils first arrive in school. We carried out a 'learning walk' through classes accompanied by yourself or your senior leaders. We also held discussions with four governors and held meetings with other members of staff. A telephone conversation took place with the school's external education adviser. We talked to pupils to gather their views.

We scrutinised a wide range of documentary evidence, including information on pupils' outcomes, the school's self-evaluation, governing body minutes, and records relating to the monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment, behaviour, attendance and the safeguarding of pupils.

We had telephone conversations with parents during the day. We considered the 14 responses to the online survey, 'Parent View', including nine written comments. In addition, nine responses to the staff questionnaire were considered.