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23 February 2018

Mr Steve Hollinghurst
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hollinghurst

Short inspection of St Francis Special School

Following my visit to the school on 6 February 2018 with Ofsted Inspector Andrew Penman, 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 October 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 took swift action to build upon the strengths that inspectors identified by implementing initiatives to increase pupils' engagement with learning. St Francis is a friendly and happy school where pupils enjoy warm relationships with staff and with each other. Pupils say that they like their friends and playing outside. Parents and carers are positive about the school, saying that their children want to attend. Parents recognise that their children are skilfully supported to grow into young adults who have interests, can make choices and take an active role in their own care. Pupils told inspectors that they like to be at school because 'learning is fun'. They pointed out that they 'work hard all day long'.

Following the previous inspection, your school's growing success resulted in the local authority asking you to lead improvements at the neighbouring Heathfield Special School. The two schools are now federated and, although the arrangement is at an early stage, all leaders and governors are embracing the benefits of collaborative working. Your partnership with a teaching school that has similarities to your own is further supporting initiatives that strengthen pupils' progress.

There are many occasions when pupils' learning takes place outside of the school. For example, during the day when inspectors visited, secondary pupils went to an activity centre to enjoy a rock-climbing experience. A group of sixth-form students went on a regular visit to the local college to which they will transfer later in the year. Each day,

a group of students buy and prepare lunch, which helps them to develop skills for adult life. These and many other opportunities, such as a residential visit and participation in many sporting events, are highlights of all pupils' time at the school.

You recognise the importance of having a highly skilled team which works collaboratively to meet pupils' care needs and make learning interesting. Teachers and support assistants are proud to work at the school. The federation is providing wider opportunities for staff to work together, such as through sharing ideas, resources and curriculum planning. Wisely, you recognise that your new leaders have an important role to play to build on the school's current best practice.

New teachers to the school benefit from thorough training, enabling them to develop expertise in teaching pupils who have profound and multiple learning disabilities. You give them every opportunity to learn from more experienced staff. All staff value the training given by the medical practitioners and therapists who are linked to the school. Support staff understand pupils' wide-ranging medical conditions and provide timely intervention, for example by ensuring that pupils are comfortable while they are learning. Similarly, teaching staff make expert use of a wide range of means to support effective communication with your many non-verbal pupils, such as by using object reference, picture exchange and signing. Specialist staff, such as for physical education, dance and drama, add further richness to pupils' learning.

You are determined that pupils should enjoy and achieve. Leaders have high expectations that the school should inspire learning. Your school's vision is that 'every child matters, every moment counts', and there were many times when inspectors saw how this was exemplified. For example, during times of the day when pupils needed to be repositioned or required personal care, teachers found stimulating resources that held pupils' attention so that learning continued.

Governors know the school well and are highly committed to its ongoing improvement. They understand their responsibilities and take them seriously. They are ambitious for the federation and are prepared to challenge you in order to secure the very best provision for pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding and pupils' welfare are at the top of everyone's agenda. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Leaders recognise the particular risks for pupils who have learning disabilities and can therefore be especially vulnerable. As the school's designated safeguarding lead, you work closely with your deputy leaders to ensure that staff know how and when to report any concerns about a pupil's welfare or safety. Right from their start at the school, staff are trained to understand their responsibilities towards child protection and safeguarding. Existing staff are regularly updated, including knowing how to keep pupils safe from radicalisation.

Staff provide personal and medical care with the utmost respect for each pupil, which helps pupils to attend school whenever possible. By the time pupils enter the school, they are already known to a wide range of agencies. Staff work hard to ensure that

pupils and their families receive the help they need in a timely manner, and you offer dedicated support for parents.

Governors are knowledgeable about safeguarding and all have attended training appropriate to their role. They provide appropriate checks to ensure that safeguarding practices and procedures are strong.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, inspectors took account of how well teachers ensure that pupils' individual needs are met and how effectively leaders check that pupils make strong progress in their learning. We also looked at the extent to which the curriculum enables pupils to develop important learning skills.
- The majority of teachers know their pupils very well and they perceptively match learning activities to meet individual needs. Teachers work closely with support assistants to keep pupils focused and on task, but they also recognise when pupils need to relax. Teaching staff provide pupils with opportunities to make choices and respond to stimuli. They interpret pupils' responses effectively, in whichever way they are communicated. Leaders are rightly prioritising support to a few teachers who are new to the school.
- Teachers communicate regularly with parents, keeping them informed of their children's achievements. Some home-school contacts are particularly successful, resulting in learning that supports pupils both at home and at school, such as in the case of a pupil who learned to use picture exchange to implement a self-help strategy for managing anxiety. Success was due to the patient support of parents and school staff.
- Teachers carefully record pupils' small steps in progress in developing skills across different aspects of learning. Inspectors observed that teachers' patient attention to detail successfully informs provision over time for the large majority of pupils, helping them to learn at their own pace. Inspectors observed a few pupils whose prior progress was not effectively taken into account. Leaders agreed that, for a minority of pupils, such as those who are most able, learning could be more challenging.
- In addition to leaders' monitoring of teaching and learning, the head of school checks on pupils' progress in discussion with teachers, keeping under review the targets that are set for individual pupils. Leaders and governors use school performance information to check the progress that groups of pupils are making across the school. Teachers are alert to any differences and respond quickly. New leaders are well placed to look even more deeply at each pupil's performance information to sharpen strategies that will further improve all pupils' learning and achievement.
- The curriculum is enriched by sensory classroom experiences that effectively motivate pupils to express feelings and needs. Inspectors saw, for example, how secondary pupils enjoyed learning about shapes using movement, colour, music and touch. A recent interactive theatre experience transformed the school hall into a multi-sensory space with water, sound, light and screens. Pupils' displayed work

shows the enthusiasm of their participation in the drama workshops.

- Pupils successfully learn to develop functional skills in line with their abilities. Reading is supported by learning phonics to help pupils to recognise key words either in a book or on a screen. They also learn to make their own short sentences. Pupils learn about books and stories, such as in the primary classes where they were learning about the book 'Aliens Love Underpants'. In mathematics, pupils learn to recognise and use numbers and shapes. Older pupils develop an understanding of using money when shopping. Teaching staff support pupils to use computers to practise basic skills and to communicate, including by making choices.
- The curriculum supports pupils to develop skills that prepare them for the future by promoting independence. A parent captured the school's approach effectively by stating that 'The curriculum is setting our daughter up very well for the next stage in her education.'
- Pupils' effective development of communication skills is central to their achievement and is a strong feature of the school. Where provision is particularly effective, teaching supports pupils throughout the day to develop, practise and revisit relevant skills in different and well-linked areas of learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- new leaders within the federation increase their impact on the quality of the school's provision by sharing and developing best practice
- the school's work to refine the use of assessment results in precisely matched learning activities that meet the needs of all pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda Jacobs
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, the head of school, your assistant headteachers and three members of the governing body. Another governor sent in some written comments. We also talked to a number of parents at the start of the school day. We met with a representative of the local authority and a mixed group of staff. We spoke to pupils in lessons and during an arranged meeting. We visited most

classes with a senior leader, taking in a variety of different areas of learning across all key stages. We looked at a range of school documentation. This included the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan, governing body minutes, policies and other information on the school's website, the single central record of recruitment checks and pupils' attendance and performance information. We took account of eight responses to Ofsted's Parent View survey, with accompanying free-text responses, and one letter from a parent. There were 10 responses to the Ofsted staff questionnaire.