

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ms Kelly
Headteacher
Hillside Special School
Hitchcock Place
Sudbury
Suffolk
CO10 1NN

Dear Ms Kelly

Short inspection of Hillside Special School

Following my visit to the school on 7 March 2018 with Marianick Ellender-Gelé, HMI, 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 outstanding in January 2014.

The school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. You are determined to build upon the many strengths identified at the previous inspections to make Hillside School even better. Leaders have a strong will to improve the school further and to ensure that it continues to meet the individual needs of the pupils. They work tirelessly with staff, parents, carers, governors and the whole community to ensure that pupils gain the best education they can. With the support of leaders and governors you have the capacity to improve attendance and to ensure more consistency in the strategies that pupils and staff use to improve communication.

Almost all parents are extremely positive about the school. The very large majority of parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, or sent text messages to the inspection team are very pleased about the progress their children have made since joining the school. Parents also praise staff who do 'a fabulous job at fulfilling every child's individual needs'. Parents are very clear that they feel the new leadership team continues the improvement journey. One parent commented that 'Hillside Special School managed to maintain and even raise its standards in a climate of change of leadership team'. This inspection found that any adjustments you have made since you were appointed as the headteacher have been extremely well managed. You are fine-tuning the provision to make it the best it can be.

Pupils come into Hillside School very happily, looking forward to the day. They settle very quickly after a calm, organised entry into the school, which enables

them to be ready for learning. Pupils are very well behaved throughout the day with any minor incidents of challenging behaviour managed well and calmly across the school.

The school is a vibrant, happy place where all pupils are interested in their learning. Pupils move confidently around the school and take advantage of most of the different opportunities offered to them. Staff make the most of all chances for learning, including at play, in the lunch hall, and working with specialist staff or visitors. During this inspection, pupils were welcoming and polite at all times.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding pupils is always a high priority. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Records are detailed and of high quality.

The culture of safeguarding pupils' well-being is very strong. Links with outside agencies are used very effectively to stand up for and help families and pupils. You have identified the safety risks that exist when pupils miss school too often and monitor their absences very closely. You acknowledge that further work is required to support specific families, and are working with them to try to arrange appointments with some medical services in the school. This allows pupils to be at school and parents to work in partnership passing on all relevant information quickly and efficiently.

The school's work with health colleagues is excellent. It enables pupils with complex medical conditions to access learning and take a full part in the school day.

Inspection findings

- The new leadership team has built effective relationships with an already strong team of staff to accurately evaluate the school's strengths and areas for development. Parents and staff said that they are impressed with the leadership team because they are always finding ways of improving the school further. This includes bringing in additional specialists to enhance the curriculum, the development of the school's grounds and the provision of a wide range of training opportunities for staff. The positive impact of your leadership is demonstrated across the school and has inspired teachers to be relentless in their drive to improve their own practice.
- One of the key lines of enquiry for the inspection related to attendance. In the past, attendance has been low compared to the national average, and I wanted to understand if this was improving.
- Attendance rates remain below the national average. This is mainly due to the considerable medical needs of pupils. However, you are taking effective steps to improve attendance where this is not the case, including rewarding good attendance, reminding parents of the importance of pupils attending school

regularly and closely tracking the attendance of pupils with high absence rates. You agree that there is still more to do to bring attendance levels up.

- Teaching and learning are highly effective across the school. Children in the early years settle well, are able to concentrate for extended periods to develop language and are encouraged to make good use of the imaginative play areas. Older pupils make considerable progress in the life-skills room, using new equipment, which excites and encourages learning and progress. The effective planning and management of transitions across the school enable pupils to be calm and ready for learning. Pupils know what to expect at all stages. You recognise that it would be beneficial if pupils' communication skills were developed even further. Some staff are not yet confident in using some strategies such as signing, symbols, gestures and information technology.
- The curriculum is full of opportunities to enhance pupils' life and independence skills. These include pupils putting away their own coats, choosing their own lunch, helping to make toast for others, visiting local shops and spending time in the forest schools and outside learning areas. Pupils are able to access specialist teachers, instructors and adults as well as gain from their expertise in areas such as physical education, music and dance.
- Parents are kept informed of their children's progress and they are pleased to see what pupils are doing at school. The school's journals provide parents with an invaluable picture of what their children are doing at school. Parents appreciate the ability to continue areas of work and progress at home. You feel that assessment procedures could be even better, and have plans in place to refine them further.
- You are making the most of strong partnerships with a range of agencies. The school's effective collaboration with health professionals enables pupils with complex medical needs to access learning. The school has created facilities for the training of many teachers and learning support assistants. This means that staff can continue to meet the health and care needs of pupils even when the health staff are not on site.
- There are strong links with colleges to prepare older pupils for leaving the school and to ensure that families are happy and ready when their children move on to the next stage of their education. Effective partnerships with other local schools provide further opportunities for the development of pupils' social, personal and learning skills.
- The school is highly regarded by the local authority and works well with neighbouring schools to the benefit of all. The school willingly shares its expertise and contributes positively to local networks.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- attendance improves, especially for pupils whose attendance falls below 90%
- supportive communication strategies are used more consistently across the curriculum and throughout the school day.

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

Yours sincerely

Jackie Mullan
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

The inspection was carried out by two inspectors. We reviewed a range of published information, including the school's website, the school's self-evaluation document and the school's development plan. We examined records of attendance and reviewed safeguarding procedures and arrangements.

We visited all classes, accompanied by senior staff, and observed pupils' behaviour at lunch and break, as well as before school.

We held meetings with senior staff, teachers and governors to investigate key aspects of the school's work. We considered 35 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, 45 responses to the staff survey, and 31 text messages from parents. We spoke to the chair of governors and a local authority representative to discuss the school's provision.