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Mrs Janis French
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs French

Short inspection of Priory Woods School

Following my visit to the school on 26 April 2018 with Ann Muxworthy, 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 outstanding in March 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Your school's strapline, 'a special place to learn', is well chosen. Pupils and staff are overwhelmingly positive about the quality of education on offer at Priory Woods. Pupils are at the heart of everything you do, and your curriculum stands out as engaging, exciting and designed to bring the very best out of the pupils in your care. Comments from parents, such as, 'My child has come on in leaps and bounds,' and, 'This amazing place has given my child so much confidence and support,' typify the comments of many. Inspectors agree that the education on offer at school is excellent.

Your own leadership is characterised by a strong moral purpose, and a quiet determination to improve the life chances of pupils at school. You want to hear the ideas of other leaders and have developed a strong team approach to school improvement. As a result, middle leadership has strengthened further since the time of the previous inspection. You are innovative, and yet you weigh up options carefully. You, with your senior team, make precise plans once final decisions are made.

An example of this is the way that you have developed both the curriculum and the procedures used to check how quickly pupils are progressing. Your work to develop different types of learning and activities for the different needs of your pupils is strong. Your 'informal', 'semi-formal' and 'formal' curriculum models ensure that all

of your pupils make strong progress, whether they can access some formal learning, or whether they need additional support to communicate at a basic level. The tracking system that you use helps you to identify the progress pupils are making both academically and on a social or personal level. Next steps for pupils are precise and staff know exactly how to help pupils move forward in their learning. There is a high level of consistency in the way this system is implemented. Inspectors saw evidence of how individual targets are shaped into classroom activities, and how the pupils' progress is captured. You are aware that some targets need to dovetail more closely with the external accreditations that you use with some pupils at key stage 4 and students at key stage 5.

Your curriculum is rich and varied. Pupils have access to a wide range of activities through the arts, and European projects. Some pupils have had the opportunity to visit Spain or Slovakia, among other destinations. Work on enterprise and on environmentalism, for example, is then brought back into classrooms to enrich the experiences of all pupils. Students in the sixth form benefit from an independent living space, the 'bungalow', where they develop skills for life. Students experience the world of work in Cafe 16, run by the school.

Teachers plan well-structured activities that meet the needs of pupils extremely well, and other adults in classrooms ensure that these plans are followed. In lessons, relationships between pupils and teachers are outstanding. There is a real sense of trust at school. Humour, laughter and a love of life permeate classrooms. A focus on drama, music and dance helps to develop both pupils' senses and their understanding of the world around them. Pupils who need additional therapeutic support have these needs met. Teachers ensure that pupils with the most complex needs have a range of interesting experiences in lessons. Similarly, pupils who are able to express themselves well engage in different activities across the curriculum and develop independence as they move through the school. The most able pupils develop their reading and writing skills strongly.

Teachers have high expectations of pupils. In the sixth form, dance students passed all of the qualifications that were available from the awarding body. Your leaders, therefore, worked with the examination board to develop more. Pupils at school engaged with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and have shown a keen interest in this area of the curriculum. A striking example of the care teachers take in planning relevant and uplifting lessons was seen when teachers, dressed as the cast from 'The Greatest Showman', encouraged pupils with complex needs to join in rhythms and to enjoy expressing themselves in a drama session. Pupils increasingly focused on the task in hand, according to their abilities. They rose to meet the high expectations of the teachers.

You are not complacent. Under the direction of the governing body, you have been effective in addressing the areas for improvement noted in the previous inspection report. Record-keeping for any health and safety issues, or concerns linked to safeguarding, is strong. Inspectors observed teachers pushing pupils further in their learning through focused questioning. The most able pupils are making rapid gains in their knowledge and skills.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are kind and courteous. They are respectful to their peers. They understand the need to behave well in class and when moving around the building. The golden rules that you have established are adhered to by pupils. They listen carefully, they are kind and gentle, they look after things, they are honest and they work hard.

Pupils are confident that if any unkind words are ever used, or if anyone is ever being bullied, adults in school would help sort it out immediately. Members of the school council told us that pupils feel safe at school. Parents and staff agree.

Policies used to keep pupils safe are effective, and staff training is up to date. Safeguarding procedures are alive at school and are understood by staff. This can be seen, for example, through the care taken to ensure that pupils arrive safely into school from taxis, and that they move safely around the building. There is a tenacity around ensuring that more vulnerable pupils are supported. School leaders are proactive in working with outside agencies in order to keep pupils safe and secure, and they fight to ensure that the needs of their pupils are met. The school works well with the local authority, offering professional development opportunities to others, and helping on a practical level where possible.

The curriculum helps pupils understand how to keep safe. This includes, for example, e-safety hints, relationship and sex education and drugs education, all at an age-appropriate level. A culture of safeguarding and care is evident in the school.

Inspection findings

- One of my areas of focus was the progress that pupils are making at school. As a result of the accurate identification of individuals' needs and teachers' consistently strong planning to meet these needs, pupils are making excellent progress. This is equally the case for children in early years as it is for students in the sixth form. You are aware that a greater proportion of pupils in the primary phase have more complex needs, and you have shaped the curriculum well accordingly. You use spaces for additional therapies effectively, and dovetail medical provision with learning in the classroom. 'Purple class', where planned academic interventions take place, also helps specific groups of pupils to make strong progress.
- I wanted to check that governors meet their statutory responsibilities. Governors bring a range of relevant skills to the leadership of your school. Several have in-depth knowledge of special education. They support you, but also have high expectations of your performance. They explained that the slight omissions from the website that I had identified were due to file management issues rather than breaches of requirements. You quickly rectified these.
- Parents are very happy with the quality of provision at school. You provide a range of opportunities for parents to work with you to help to support their children. You run sessions to help parents understand the curriculum on offer and any specialist programmes that pupils are following. Parents of children in

early years appreciate your 'learning from play' events. Similarly, parents of sixth-form students enjoy coffee mornings in the 'bungalow'. Only a few parents responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. You continually try to get more parents to give feedback about your work. An increasingly large proportion of parents support the life of the school.

- Although not included in lines of questioning for this inspection, I note the positive impact of the professional development you offer staff, and the way they respond positively to their annual appraisal. Staff at school are keen to improve their practice. They are involved in developing the curriculum at school. You harness their skill, creativity and imagination well.
- You use the arts as a vehicle to ignite learning and your staff are fully on board with this. There is a palpable sense of positivity at school. One member of your team told me that 'if you can't talk you can still sing, if you can't walk you can still dance'. This encapsulates the ethos of your school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- assessment procedures align more closely with the requirements of external accreditations, where appropriate.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Wardle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of this inspection, I considered the actions that leaders are taking to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all of the pupils. I also explored the extent to which school leaders, including the governing body, make sure that statutory requirements are met. I looked at the progress that pupils are making across the school, including children in early years and students in the sixth form. In addition, I investigated the extent to which school leaders engage with parents. I looked at how safe pupils are at school, and how adults at school teach pupils to keep themselves safe.

During the inspection, I met with you, senior leaders and middle leaders. I met with four members of the governing body, including the chair. Inspectors spoke to parents visiting school. Inspectors observed teaching and learning with you and

other school leaders. Evidence of pupils' work from different year groups and a variety of subjects was scrutinised, and an inspector listened to pupils read. An inspector spoke formally to a group of pupils, in addition to observing behaviour at lunchtime and pupils moving around the building. I discussed the strengths of the school with representatives from the local authority, and you presented information detailing pupils' progress and attainment, the school development plan and the school's self-evaluation document. You explained your assessment system to inspectors and how this dovetails with the curriculum on offer. I also reviewed a variety of other documents, including those relating to safeguarding and policies on the school's website.