

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Kevin Ruddell
Deputy Headteacher
Danecourt School
Hotel Road
Watling Street
Gillingham
Kent
ME8 6AA

Dear Mr Ruddell

Short inspection of Danecourt School

Following my visit to the school on Wednesday 2 May 2018 with Anne Allen, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be outstanding in February 2012.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of outstanding as a result of this inspection.**

Since the last inspection, the school has been through a number of changes at both governor and senior leadership level. In 2015, the school became part of the Argent Academy Trust and shortly after this time a new headteacher was appointed. In September 2017, following a period of instability and some significant turbulence, an interim executive board was tasked with the challenge of finding the school a new academy sponsor. Subsequently, in April 2018, the school became part of the Barnsole Primary Trust and the previous headteacher resigned from post. The trust is currently recruiting for the position of head of school.

The school has an overwhelmingly positive and friendly atmosphere. Inspectors observed and chatted with pupils and they were relaxed and happy. Pupils enjoy coming to school and are appreciative of the wide range of activities that are available to them. Relationships between pupils and staff are strong and supportive.

Parents are complimentary about the work of the school. They appreciate the regular communication that they receive from staff through the use of the home-school book. Parents told inspectors that this personalised communication provides them with information to support their children at home. One parent commented

that they appreciate how the school treats their child as a 'complete individual'.

Despite some significant changes in the senior leadership team and governance of the school, staff morale is high. Staff state that the school has been 're-energised' since September 2017 and that they are beginning to gain confidence after a period of feeling deskilled. Staff appreciate the support that they are given by leaders and the wealth of training that they receive.

Teachers and teaching assistants build positive relationships with pupils in the classroom. Pupils are encouraged to take risks in their learning and become resilient to failure. Because of this, most pupils are making strong progress from their starting points across the curriculum.

The board of trustees is ambitious for the school and its pupils. Trustees are knowledgeable and realistic about the school's current effectiveness. They are frank about what is going well and what could be better. Plans for the trust to delegate its governance duties to a local governing body are well thought through. However, the implementation of these plans is in the initial stages of development. Consequently, it is too early to see the impact of governance arrangements on pupils' outcomes.

At the time of the last inspection, leaders were asked to build on the consistency of practice across the school by ensuring that small steps in pupils' progress were recorded and that teachers gave pupils sufficient time to respond to tasks. Pupils' education, health and care plan outcomes are now broken down into smaller, more manageable steps by staff. As a result, staff have an accurate picture of the small steps in progress that most pupils have made and teachers regularly use this information to correctly identify any pupils who are at risk of falling behind. Classroom visits by inspectors showed that most pupils are given sufficient time by staff to respond to tasks. However, on occasions staff are still too quick to step in and support pupils. This restricts the progress that these pupils make and limits their independence.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Records of the assurances taken to check on the suitability of staff are efficient and managed well. Staff receive training on how to keep pupils safe from abuse and the sways of radicalisation and extremism. Staff follow the school's policies and procedures well to report any concerns that they identify about pupils' welfare or well-being. Written records about any such concerns and the actions taken are timely and thorough. Leaders work closely together with families and external agencies to support the most vulnerable pupils. Because of this, pupils feel safe and are safe.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we agreed to look at: the effectiveness of safeguarding; how leaders are ensuring that there is strong leadership at all levels which has a positive impact on pupils' outcomes; how effectively teachers use the information they have about what pupils can do and understand to plan activities that meet pupils' needs; and how successfully leaders are addressing pupils' rates of attendance and supporting them to catch up when they have missed school.
- Since the school's previous inspection, instability in leadership at senior and governance levels has led to a decline in the effectiveness of the school. Over time, school leaders have not been held to account sufficiently well for the work of the school. This has allowed weaknesses to develop in the quality of provision for pupils. Nonetheless, in September 2017 the interim executive board introduced some necessary changes to the governance of the school. Consequently, leaders are now held to account for most aspects of the school's performance, including the use of additional funding. More recently, since the school joined the Barnsole Primary Trust, leadership is beginning to be distributed across the school. Staff are starting to feel empowered and are taking more ownership for the impact that their work is having on pupils' outcomes.
- Scrutiny of pupils' work and observations in classrooms demonstrate that most pupils are making strong progress over time. In situations where progress is slow due to the individual needs of the pupils, inspectors saw pupils making small steps of progress. However, leaders have correctly identified that teachers do not consistently use the vast amount of information they have about what pupils can already do and understand to plan activities that consistently match individual pupils' needs. When this happens, pupils' rates of progress are reduced.
- Most teachers correctly identify pupils' misconceptions through skilled and targeted questioning. This consolidates and reinforces pupils' learning. As a result, most pupils' knowledge and skills become embedded.
- Attendance is a high priority for leaders and rates of absence are below those seen nationally for special schools. The robust tracking of pupils' absence ensures that pupils are safe when they are not in school. Individualised strategies to improve attendance are having a positive impact and there are improvements in the attendance of pupils who have had previously high levels of absence.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the information about what pupils can already do and understand is used consistently well to plan activities that match all pupils' needs
- leadership at all levels continues to develop so that all leaders have an informed and accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
- trustees' plans to improve the effectiveness of governance are implemented swiftly so that school leaders can be rigorously held to account for all aspects of the school's performance.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive

officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Medway. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Emma Sanderson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the assistant headteacher and the chief executive officer of the Barnsole Primary Trust at the start of the day. We discussed your evaluation of the school's effectiveness and agreed the key areas we would focus on during the inspection. During the day, I held further discussions with you. I also met with the chair of the board of trustees. Inspectors observed teaching in 10 lessons, mostly jointly with senior leaders. We also scrutinised pupils' work and individual files. We took account of 15 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors spoke with parents before school and with staff and pupils throughout the day. Inspectors analysed a range of the school's documentation, including leaders' checks on pupils' progress, the quality of teaching and learning, and safeguarding policies and procedures.