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11 June 2018

Mr Ricky Porter
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Dear Mr Ricky Porter

Short inspection of Abbey Hill School and Performing Arts College

Following my visit to the school on 15 May 2018 with Elizabeth Ellis-Martin, 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 good in February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, together with other leaders and governors, have ensured that the strengths of the school have been sustained and built upon.

The school has retained its specialist status for performing arts and you have focused on providing an enriched curriculum that caters for the academic, personal and social development of your pupils. You have also ensured that teaching remains consistently good. The impact of the new initiatives that you have introduced is reflected in the sustained progress that pupils are making in all aspects of their development.

Abbey Hill is a happy, relaxed and friendly school. My colleague and I were made to feel very welcome by all staff and pupils. The pupils are confident, resilient and invariably polite. They are proud of their school and this was evident in their behaviour and their attitude to their school work. Breaktimes and unstructured sessions encourage pupils to develop their confidence further by sharing their skills and knowledge with younger and less able pupils, through lunchtime and after-school clubs. Pupils stated that they felt safe and that their school is a warm and welcoming school where they can 'definitely be themselves'. Any incidents of bullying are minor and dealt with quickly and effectively and behaviour management is not a 'soft touch'.

Relationships between staff and pupils are strong and mutually respectful. When

asked what they like about their school the first thing that pupils mentioned was, 'I can talk to staff if I have worries.' Older pupils say that if they do not wish to talk about their concerns they can write them down and place them in the 'worry box' for staff to read. Members of the school council said that their contributions to policies and projects are valued by school leaders.

There is a strong emphasis on social, moral, spiritual and cultural aspects of learning and these are firmly embedded in your school curriculum. Leaders recognise the importance of the mental and physical well-being of all pupils and they provide pupils with the opportunities to identify and learn the personal skills which will prepare them for adulthood. The personal, health and social education curriculum is a vital and strong aspect of what you provide for your pupils. It teaches them about how to eat healthily and stay safe in the community and online. You are currently working with parents to raise awareness of e-safety by ensuring that there is continuity between home and school with regard to recognising the potential risks of online activities.

Parents are extremely supportive of and passionate about the school. Those parents who completed questionnaires and those who spoke to inspectors at the start of the school day spoke highly of the staff and provision. A typical comment was: 'Communication is strong, concerns are dealt with well.' Parents are confident that what is offered meets their children's needs.

You, together with other leaders and members of the governing body, know the school well. You are clear about the strengths of the provision and are ambitious for the school to develop further for the benefit of the pupils. Governors are kept well informed about progress, teaching and learning and safeguarding through your termly reports and their visits to the school. They play a full part in driving forward new initiatives and improving whole-school performance.

You are enthusiastic in your desire to lead and support others. Your school's expertise and forward-thinking is often sought by other schools and promoted by the local authority. Your own drive and determination to extend staff skills has had a significant impact on pupils' learning. The extensive training package that you have for all staff ensures that staff are well trained and equipped to meet the needs of your pupils.

Areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection have been successfully addressed. Teaching has improved so that it is now consistently good. During this inspection staff used their subject knowledge and expertise well, for example in a sensory session staff expertly guided children into taking risks and experiencing different sensations. There was a deep sense of trust between staff and pupils. Staff work hard to find the right ways to communicate with pupils and to stimulate engagement at the appropriate level.

You have a precise understanding of how to improve the school further. You have recently introduced new assessment systems to measure pupils' progress in their personal development as well as in more academic areas of learning. This is not

currently fully embedded or established across all key stages.

There are not enough accredited courses that take into account pupils' aspirations and abilities. You have recognised that this is an area to develop and plan to introduce additional courses to enable pupils to gain accreditation in a wider range of subject areas.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a very strong safeguarding culture at Abbey Hill School. You make sure that protecting pupils and keeping them safe is a key priority for everyone. You and your leadership team have made sure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and take account of the needs of the pupils in this school.

Pupils' medical needs are well supported and the necessary medication checks are in place. There are appropriate procedures to ensure that staff register any concerns they may have about pupils' well-being and safety. Senior leaders follow these up immediately. There are clear protocols for dealing with absences and pupils missing from school. When there have been safeguarding incidents, school leaders have followed the school's and local authority's procedures to the letter. You are diligent and tenacious in following up concerns and making sure that pupils and their families receive the support that they need. Records are detailed and thorough.

Safeguarding training is regularly provided for all staff so they know what to do and who to contact when they have any worries. Throughout the school pupils learn about the potential risks and dangers they might face as they grow up. As a result, you raise pupils' awareness of how to keep safe, including when they are online. Pupils said that they feel safe and well looked after at school.

Staff use a range of techniques to help pupils manage and regulate their own behaviours. Leaders have introduced support systems to improve pupils' mental health and well-being, including working with child and adolescent mental health services, creating a pastoral welfare support group and assessing pupils' emotional literacy, conduct, hyperactivity and social skills. Staff rarely need to use physical interventions to assist pupils in managing their behaviours. Logs of behaviour incidents and analysis of behaviours show that there is a significant downward trend in the frequency of interventions.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have taken effective action to improve teaching since the last inspection. Lessons observed show that teaching is consistently good. This good teaching is reflected in the work in pupils' books, which shows strong progress in the early years and in English across all key stages. Leaders have ensured that assessment is a key priority at the end of each lesson. Staff apply next steps targets, in line with the school's assessment policy, to enable pupils to understand how to develop their work further. Teachers know their pupils and their capabilities well

and they use this knowledge to ensure that they match tasks to the abilities of pupils. Support from teaching assistants enables pupils to cope with unfamiliar work tasks and challenging situations. In some lessons in key stages 3 and 4 there is not enough challenge to help more-able pupils achieve their full potential.

- At the end of key stage 4 all pupils are entered for entry-level examinations, in both academic and vocational subjects. Every pupil achieves or exceeds the grade the school expects of them. A small minority of pupils have accessed GCSE courses at local high schools in art, computing and mathematics. Leaders recognise that more pupils would benefit from having these opportunities. They are looking into ways to broaden the school's offer by negotiating with the local authority to extend provision to incorporate more classrooms and offer a wider range of vocational subjects. All pupils went on to college or joined the sixth form at Abbey Hill.
- You have recently introduced a new assessment system for recording and tracking pupils' progress. This system breaks down the curriculum into smaller steps and enables the tracking of life skills for pupils with autism. This new system is not yet firmly established across all key stages. Governors and staff recognise that with the changing and diverse needs of the pupils, the system requires further development. Progress tracking shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds perform particularly well and in some cases better than their peers.
- Extensive staff training provides a wider range of opportunities for all teaching and support staff to improve and increase their skills, knowledge and expertise. This ensures that the provision for pupils is enriched further. Through your collaborative work with other special schools within the trust you have been able to offer bespoke training packages to all staff. These include training in communication, sensory training and specialist training for teaching pupils with autism. As a result of this, staff are well equipped to support pupils.
- Leaders have ensured that additional funding has been used effectively to increase resources for reading and mathematics, such as programmes to improve phonics and using and applying number knowledge to a range of everyday situations. These resources have helped pupils improve their reading and numeracy skills. The sensory equipment provided enables pupils to work in a relaxed, calming environment. Extra support from occupational therapists provides pupils with opportunities to develop strength, flexibility and balance as well as their communication skills. High levels of support from skilled staff in small-group work and classroom situations enables pupils to gain confidence and take risks in a controlled and safe environment. Specialist-equipped sensory rooms throughout the school are utilised to full effect to provide 1:1 occupational therapy sessions, sensory integration programmes and calming therapies, which improve pupils' well-being.
- Sixth-form provision at Abbey Hill has grown in recent years. More pupils are choosing to stay in the sixth form for a longer period of time to ensure that they leave with the necessary skills to prepare them for life in modern Britain. The curriculum offered has been extended to include the Duke of Edinburgh's Award

Scheme.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they offer a wider range of accredited courses and increased level of academic challenge in key stages 3 and 4
- they determine a clearer and more consistent system of demonstrating pupils' progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Kim Ellis
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you and senior leaders to discuss progress since the last inspection, your school's self-evaluation and the key lines of enquiry for this inspection. We agreed a plan for the rest of the day.

Inspectors spoke to several members of staff about the curriculum, assessment, behaviour and welfare and attendance. The lead inspector met with members of the governing body, including the chair of governors, the school's business manager and the designated lead for safeguarding. Inspectors visited classrooms to observe pupils and staff at work, met with members of the school council and observed behaviour at lunchtime.

Inspectors looked at samples of pupils' work from all key stages, including the early years and sixth form. Inspectors looked at documents, including the school's self-evaluation, school improvement plan, record of local authority visits, minutes from governing body meetings, the single central record and staff records of professional development. We looked at 11 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. We considered the school's own surveys of parents' and pupils' views. We also considered the views of 49 staff who completed the online questionnaire.