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Mr Frank Stanford  
Executive Headteacher  
St Mary's School  
Horam  
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East Sussex  
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Dear Mr Stanford

### **Short inspection of St Mary's School**

Following my visit to the school on 23 May 2018 with Simon Yates, 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 good in January 2015.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

Leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the school opened as an academy. You, the head of school and leaders are determined to ensure that all pupils are equipped with the skills and qualifications they need to move on to the next stage of their education, training or apprenticeship.

The school meets the highly complex needs of its pupils well. You and senior leaders expect your pupils to achieve good academic standards, but you also recognise the importance of developing their personal, social and independence skills. Pupils are very positive about the school. They like the variety of activities on offer, for example, swimming in the school's pool and football tournaments. One pupil said, 'My behaviour has got better because the school has helped me.' Parents and carers are also happy with the school. All who responded to Ofsted's survey, Parent View, would recommend the school to other parents. One parent said, 'Sending my child to St Mary's was the best decision I have ever made.' In our joint lesson observations, we noticed that where teaching is highly effective, all pupils engaged in learning with enthusiasm. Where teaching was not as strong, staff would benefit further from sharing the good practice of the strongest teachers. Pupils' English books show the strong progress they have made in developing their writing skills since September. For example, pupils have moved from writing short, simple paragraphs, to writing more complex pieces and have also improved their punctuation and letter formation.

The school is part of the SABDEN Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and the MAT's local advisory board provides governance for the school. Governors bring valuable skills

and experience to their roles. Individual governors hold specific responsibilities related to their skills, such as safeguarding. They visit regularly and know the school well. Governors and the external consultant are able to challenge the information they receive from leaders. As a result of this challenge, they have a good understanding of pupils' outcomes and the impact of leaders' actions. Governors effectively hold leaders to account and set clear targets for the school's improvement.

Since the school opened as an academy, you have continued to make improvements. For example, you have successfully ensured that teachers plan effectively to meet the needs of the most able pupils. Leaders work hard at improving attendance and pupils with persistent absence are supported well. Attendance is increasing, but you rightly recognise that pupils not in school do not have the opportunity to develop both academically and socially. You now ensure that robust assessment procedures identify pupils who are not making good progress so that suitable interventions can be implemented. As a result, most pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, make effective progress from their starting points.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Leaders and governors have ensured that all safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose. There is a very strong safeguarding culture within the school. The single central record of recruitment checks is fully compliant. The school's recruitment procedures are secure. Robust training enables staff to be up to date with the latest safeguarding advice and legislation. Staff know their responsibilities to safeguard pupils and report any concerns they have appropriately. Leaders work with a range of agencies and, collectively, they support the most vulnerable pupils. This ensures that these pupils and their families get the help they need. The safeguarding governor makes regular checks on the work of staff and leaders in keeping pupils safe. As a result, governors are confident that the school is effective and proactive in its work to safeguard pupils.

Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in school and know whom to go to if they need support. Teachers in personal, social, health and economic education lessons, and in other subjects, teach pupils successfully how to keep themselves safe, including when they are online. All parents who spoke to inspectors, or who completed Ofsted's survey, Parent View, agreed that their children are safe in school. One parent said, 'The setting and lovely grounds of the school are conducive to a safe, secure and protected environment and this all contributes to the well-being of the children.'

### **Inspection findings**

- As executive headteacher of the schools in the SABDEN MAT, you ensure that all school leaders collaborate effectively within the MAT. Training is organised centrally, and you rightly recognise that St Mary's teachers would benefit from learning good practice from other schools in the MAT. Additionally, St Mary's

leaders could make valuable contributions to the training delivered in the MAT.

- Pupils join the school with knowledge and skills well below the level typical for pupils of their age. In addition, they often have low self-esteem and a negative view of education as a result of their previous experiences. Before pupils are admitted, leaders collate information from parents and professionals to ensure that everything is in place for pupils' successful transition into the school. On arrival, pupils' skills and knowledge are comprehensively assessed and this detailed information is used to plan their individual learning programmes. Consequently, any gaps in their learning are addressed promptly. Leaders regularly track and analyse their assessment information and provide appropriate interventions and support for pupils who are not making the expected rate of progress. Leaders monitor the impact of these interventions and adjust them if they are not effective. As a result, most pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, make good progress.
- Leaders have created a broad and balanced curriculum which they divide into four key learning areas: core, applied, personal and cultural. As part of this curriculum, pupils participate in a wide range of activities, for example learning how to put up a tent and build a fire. The curriculum supports pupils' social, emotional, mental health and well-being development while effectively enabling pupils to develop strong behaviours for learning. Many pupils were not being educated in a school before they started at St Mary's and their previous experience of education had been unsuccessful. Pupils are enthusiastic about the variety of opportunities they have enjoyed since joining the school. They are keen to learn, engage well in lessons and, as a result, most make strong progress.
- At key stage 4, leaders place pupils on one of four pathways. Leaders use their comprehensive assessment information to allocate each pupil to the pathway that is most suitable to their ability and needs. The curriculum ensures that pupils follow accredited courses and a personalised programme, designed to equip them with the skills they need for their future. Each year, the MAT organises events that introduce pupils to possible college courses and apprenticeship opportunities. Most pupils leave with qualifications that enable them to be successful at their next provision. Leaders have found, however, that despite the diligent work of staff and parents to prepare pupils for college, a few transitions from St Mary's have not been positive. Consequently, the school is already working with colleges to ensure that, in the future, pupils are given the right support to enable them to complete their courses successfully.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons, before school and during unstructured times is generally good. Routines are embedded, enabling an orderly and prompt start to lessons. Relationships between staff and pupils are good, and staff's thorough knowledge of pupils ensures that lessons are calm and purposeful. Leaders systematically track pupils' behaviour in fine detail and their analysis of this is used to target support and intervention. As a result, the numbers of exclusions and incidents of poor behaviour have reduced substantially. There are clear structures to follow up poor attendance, which are having a positive impact. Leaders know pupils well and work closely with other professionals to support those pupils who are absent too often. Consequently, fewer pupils are

persistently absent. However, leaders are rightly focused on reducing absence further.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- improvements in pupils' attendance are sustained and any persistent absence continues to be meticulously followed up
- the quality of teaching and learning is further improved by sharing good practice across the school and MAT, so that all pupils make rapid progress from their starting points.

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 East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Susan Conway  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During this inspection, my colleague and I met with you, the head of school, the school's leadership team and the chair of the board of trustees for the MAT. I also spoke on the telephone to your school improvement partner. We visited classes in all key stages to observe pupils learning, talk with pupils about their progress, and look at their books. All lesson observations were conducted jointly with members of the leadership team. We spoke to the school council and talked on the telephone to a small number of parents. We considered the six responses to Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, Parent View. We looked at a range of documentation, including information about: the work of governors; safeguarding; the curriculum; and assessment. We examined the school's analysis of pupils' progress and attainment, leaders' self-evaluation and their plans for improvement.