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Mrs Louise Coulson
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Dear Mrs Coulson

Short inspection of Hill Top School

Following my visit to the school on 5 June 2018 with Zoe Westley, 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 October 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Hill Top School is part of a hard federation with Dryden School, another special school. Following the last inspection, the federation executive headteacher left and another executive headteacher was appointed in January 2015. This senior leader left at the end of autumn term 2017. Governors have recently reviewed the federation leadership and, as result, you were promoted from head of school to headteacher four weeks before the inspection. You are supported in your role by the headteacher at Dryden School, who has responsibility across both schools for safeguarding and the quality of teaching and learning.

The school's broad and balanced curriculum enables pupils to learn practical skills in literacy and numeracy and to develop their personal and social independence. The school's motto of 'believe, achieve, succeed' is evidenced by pupils' pride in their work and the increasing number of accredited certificates and awards that pupils achieve. Pupils speak confidently about their achievements, and their plans for what they will do when they leave school. Thinking about a recent exam, a pupil in key stage 4 proudly said that he was pleased as he had tried his best.

The school's aim of 'preparing for adulthood' is evident throughout the school. Key stage 3 pupils with autism learn independence skills at a local supermarket and in the community. Key stage 4 pupils and those in the sixth form follow a wide range of accredited courses in literacy and numeracy and to develop their vocational skills. For example, a group of key stage 4 pupils successfully completed a course in hairdressing using the school's

hairdressing salon. This experience effectively prepared pupils for work experience placements and part-time work. Pupils are helped to make choices about the next steps in education, employment or training by specialist careers advisors. This support is valued by parents and carers. Although most pupils travel to and from school on school transport, some pupils have learned to travel to school independently using public transport. One carer spoke proudly about her child being able to catch two buses for each journey, to and from school. Pupils with additional complex needs learn practical skills because teachers use carefully chosen activities which also develop pupils' sensory awareness. Pupils with communication difficulties learn well because staff use symbols, signing and alternative communication strategies effectively.

At the last inspection leaders were asked to increase the overall quality of teaching to outstanding, to raise students' achievements further by ensuring that there is consistent and useful feedback in books and to consistently challenge all students to make the best possible progress. Leaders have reviewed the school's assessments and progress tracking systems and have recently introduced a more rigorous system for setting targets and recording pupils' progress. A review of pupils' workbooks across the curriculum demonstrates that the school's marking and feedback policy is implemented consistently and that pupils are given constructive feedback to improve their work.

Leaders were also asked to develop the role and impact of middle leaders. Leaders, including governors, described the development of a more open culture in school where staff have a shared ownership for every pupil's progress. Leaders have developed the role and impact of subject leaders who work closely with senior leaders to check the quality of teaching and learning, and pupils' progress. Subject leaders attend meetings of the senior leadership team and the governing body to report on pupils' progress and the quality of teaching and learning. Leaders use this information to identify development priorities. Governors highly value their meetings with subject leaders.

As a result of an increase in the number of pupils with autism and those with social, emotional and mental health needs, leaders described their plans to review the curriculum to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of all pupils. Leaders described proposals to develop further the curriculum and assessment arrangements for pupils with complex autism, and to increase the number and variety of vocational courses at key stage 4.

Governors are proud of the school and have high aspirations for pupils and staff. They describe the inclusive ethos, purposeful atmosphere and the focus on meeting each pupil's special educational needs. The work of the experienced chair of the governing body is highly valued and he is ably supported by governors with a wide range of experience. Governors develop their skills through school-based, local authority and independent training programmes. Governors described the development of an open culture in school, the sharing of responsibility for pupils' progress and the improving impact of subject leaders. Governors have confidence in school leaders because of the way you, and other leaders, share information. Governors hold you in high regard, they value your commitment and the impact that you are making as headteacher. Governors effectively evaluate the school's performance and identify development priorities. An examination of the record of governors' meetings demonstrates that they hold you and other senior leaders to account.

The governing body values the close working relationship between the two federated schools and understands that sharing staff skills and experience will improve pupil outcomes. Governors were able to describe how additional funding has been used. However, they were unclear about the precise impact on pupils' outcomes. Governors work closely with the local authority to support the continued development of the school.

At the time of inspection, the school website did not fully meet the requirements of the Department for Education for information that maintained schools should publish. The school's charging, remissions and lettings policy had little information about charging or remissions. Leaders were advised to check the advice on the department's website, which had recently been updated.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that the school's safeguarding procedures are comprehensive and fit for purpose. Leaders have created an effective safeguarding culture where pupils' safety and well-being have a high priority and are promoted through effective multi-agency working. Policies are reviewed regularly, and records are detailed and of high quality. There are strong and respectful relationships between pupils and staff; as a result, pupils say that they feel safe and know that they can talk to a member of staff if they are worried about anything. Pupils are taught how to keep safe online and when using social media. There are regular opportunities to reinforce this in lessons and assemblies. The arrangements for pupils arriving and leaving the school site are well managed. The risk assessments for school visits and those pupils with behaviour plans are clear and comprehensive. The recently appointed family support worker is working effectively. Systems have been introduced that reward good attendance and that challenge the small number of pupils with poor attendance. As a result, attendance is improving and is above that for similar schools.

Staff and governors are knowledgeable as a result of regular safeguarding training and your confident leadership as the designated safeguarding lead. Parents agree that their children are safe in school and are well looked after. Almost all the parents who spoke to inspectors were positive about the school's effectiveness and the support provided by staff. The comment of one parent was typical of those received, when the parent said, 'This school has gone above and beyond for my child, he is thriving here. I can't praise it enough and the teachers and staff are great.'

Inspection findings

- Inspectors checked how effective the curriculum is in meeting pupils' special educational needs, how well pupils are prepared for the next step in their education, employment or training, and how effective leaders have been in ensuring that pupils make strong progress.
- The new headteacher and the senior leadership team have developed a strong culture where there is a shared commitment to improve the outcomes for every pupil. As a result of the detailed performance information that leaders provide, governors are well informed and have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. Governors celebrate the school's inclusive character, hold the headteacher

in high regard and value the impact of her leadership.

Leaders have kept the curriculum under regular review to ensure that it meets the needs of all pupils. The curriculum has a strong focus on the development of pupils' independence skills and preparation for adulthood. Learning activities are relevant and engaging, and well designed for pupils with a range of special educational needs. Pupils learn how to apply what they have learned in real-life situations and develop their confidence and personal and social skills. Pupils are well prepared for adulthood and, as a result of the extensive range of accredited courses, they leave school ready to continue with their education, employment or training. Leaders have started to develop the curriculum in response to an increase in the number of pupils who have complex special educational needs.

- Inspectors checked the effectiveness of the school's assessment system. Leaders have recently reviewed the assessment system and, as a result, have introduced new arrangements to assess and check pupils' progress more accurately. Teachers and teaching assistants meet regularly to monitor the progress of every pupil; this information is checked by senior and middle leaders. Leaders report that most pupils make expected progress. However, as a result of using the more robust systems, leaders report that there are fewer pupils making better than expected progress. Leaders understand that the quality of teaching and learning needs to continue to improve to increase the number of pupils making better than expected progress.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and learning activities are well planned. Staff have high expectations of pupils, who behave well. Pupils learn to work together effectively. Pupils speak positively about their experiences in school. In the most successful lessons, teaching assistants support learning by working effectively with the teacher, for example by leading small-group activities.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have successfully developed the role of middle leaders who work effectively with senior leaders to monitor the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' progress. Middle leaders evaluate the quality of work in their subject and report the outcomes to senior leaders and governors. As a result of this change, there has been an improvement in accuracy of assessment and target-setting and the development of a shared responsibility for pupils' progress.
- Leaders have used additional funding effectively. The regular review of pupils' progress enables leaders and teachers to identify quickly those pupils who are not making expected progress. Where pupils are falling behind, additional help is provided through interventions which enable pupils to quickly get back on track. As a result, leaders report that there is no difference in the progress of disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers. The recently appointed family support worker is ensuring that attendance is improving and the number of pupils with poor attendance continues to fall.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the curriculum continues to develop rapidly to enable the school to meet the special educational needs of all pupils
- the overall quality of teaching and learning improves further to increase the number of

pupils who make rapid progress

- the school's website meets the publication requirements from the Department for Education.

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

Yours sincerely

George Gilmore
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you and members of the senior leadership team at the beginning of the inspection to agree the key lines of enquiry for the inspection, and throughout the inspection to discuss the school's effectiveness.

Meetings were held with four parents to hear their views, as there were few responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. Inspectors considered five responses to the Ofsted free-text service from parents and spoke to one parent on the telephone. A meeting was held with four governors, including the vice-chair of the governing body. I discussed the effectiveness of the school with the local authority's school improvement partner.

Inspectors visited lessons with senior leaders and looked at work in pupils' books and spoke to pupils about their learning. An inspector spoke to a group of pupils from the school council. We observed pupils arriving and leaving school, and spoke to pupils during visits to lessons, at breaktime and lunchtime.

Inspectors examined a range of school documents, including information about pupils' achievement, the school's self-evaluation report, the school improvement plan, behaviour and attendance records, information about safeguarding, and the records of governing body meetings. Inspectors considered 19 staff responses to Ofsted's staff survey. There were no responses to the pupil questionnaire.