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Ms Rosalind Hopkins
Birch Wood (Melton Area Special School)
Grange Drive
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Dear Ms Hopkins

Short inspection of Birch Wood (Melton Area Special School)

Following my visit to the school on 28 June 2018 with Janis Warren and Karen Hayes, Ofsted Inspectors, 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 December 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 have addressed the areas for improvement from the previous inspection together with the priorities from the monitoring visit which took place in May 2017.

Since your appointment in August 2016, you have provided exceptionally strong leadership and created a very positive culture throughout the school. As a result, most pupils have a very positive attitude. They are generally happy, well settled and attend regularly.

Together with leaders and governors you have successfully managed a number of significant changes. These have included new appointments within the leadership team, the development of the provision for pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder and a review of policy and procedures to ensure that pupils are safe and any incidents of inappropriate behaviour are managed well.

You and the leadership team have an accurate view of the school's effectiveness. Governors and leaders know the school well and have a robust plan in place to address the priorities you have already identified.

You lead by example, demonstrating your absolute determination to ensure that the school is the very best it can be for pupils to succeed. Your work to distribute leadership more widely is highly effective. This has helped staff feel even more valued and have greater ownership of the school's work. Staff are very positive about

the school and feel that they are well supported by school leaders.

The leadership team has developed effective systems to check regularly on the quality of teaching. This has ensured that any ineffective or poor teaching is dealt with through swift identification, support given and timely actions taken. Leaders are, therefore, driving up the quality of teaching with a shared determination for the school to become a centre of excellence.

You have created a calm, orderly and purposeful learning environment. As a result, pupils behave well and show respect towards adults and one another. Pupils were happy to share their work with us and displayed a pride in their achievements. For example, they were keen to show recent photographs of themselves practising to perform at the Curve Theatre in Leicester.

Parents and carers are generally very positive about the school and the difference it has made to their child's well-being and progress. Comments include, 'They always take very good care of my son; I know he is in safe hands' and 'My daughter has made fantastic progress this year; I am kept well informed.'

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have carefully considered all safeguarding procedures and practice. This has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, training is up to date and records are appropriately detailed. Staff are well briefed and have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. They are alert for any signs that a pupil may be at risk, and the school's records show that staff are vigilant and report any concerns promptly.

Checks on the suitability of staff are rigorous. A key message driven by leaders, that safeguarding is at the heart of the school's work and top of the agenda for all staff, is clearly evident and demonstrated across the school.

Incidents of inappropriate behaviour are rigorously recorded and monitored. As a result of staff training, records show a significant decline in the number of incidents across the school, with restraint now rarely used.

Inspection findings

- We followed a number of lines of enquiry to check the education provided by the school. Our first two lines of enquiry were to review how well teachers check on the progress that pupils make to achieve the outcomes in their education, health and care plans, and how effectively leaders report on this progress during annual reviews. These were priority areas from the monitoring visit which took place in May 2017.
- We scrutinised the pupil passports you and leaders have devised in response to this priority area, together with the whole-school system to track pupils' progress, case studies for individual pupils and education, health and care plan targets. Parents we spoke with said that the system helped them to have a good understanding of their child's learning.

- In lessons jointly observed with you and other leaders, we found that pupils' short-term targets were clearly identified, and the progress made so far towards their long-term goals was recorded. Pupils showed an understanding of their next steps when they showed us their work.
- We noted that this has now become a part of the way in which teachers plan, assess and track progress during lessons. We concluded that the pupil-passport system is highly effective in helping staff to review and report pupils' outcomes. The system to monitor the passports, created by leaders, is rigorous and robust. Given that it was newly implemented at the beginning of this academic year, further evaluation and subsequent adjustment is appropriate.
- In the majority of lessons, we observed pupils fully engaged in activities which were appropriately matched to pupils' level of understanding. Occasionally, however, pupils' books did not show that their knowledge and skills were systematically built upon over time, or that teachers' feedback and marking adhered to the school's agreed policy. This indicates that some staff require further support to improve their practice.
- We also explored the effectiveness of the school's curriculum in meeting the needs of the pupils and supporting them to achieve good learning outcomes. We found that leaders have carefully considered the pupils' needs and how to engage them actively in the curriculum. They have reflected upon best practice seen in other schools. Sensory experiences and play are central to the learning of many pupils, especially those in the primary stage.
- Leaders' work to design the curriculum and assessment process has been undertaken with determination and always with pupils in mind. Pupils, including those with the most complex needs, fully engage in the activities that their teachers give them. Valuable outdoor activities, visits and residential experiences are integral elements to the curriculum, both to stimulate and to give real-life skill experiences to pupils. However, older pupils are not given a wide range of real-life practical experiences.
- A further line of enquiry was to look at how well leaders ensure that pupils are prepared for the next stage of their development and education. As well as holding 'move up' days, you are methodical in ensuring that pupils are given the opportunity to experience their next steps in 'bite size' pieces, which are personalised to their own needs and enable teachers to respond to any anxieties they have. Older pupils visit a college and all pupils are well prepared for the new academic year in good time.
- As part of our enquiry into leaders' effectiveness in keeping pupils safe, we examined whether pupils are taught how to keep safe through the activities that teachers organise. This includes how to keep safe online and who to go to with a problem.
- We saw many examples of pupils working safely. For instance, a group of pupils working towards their ASDAN accreditation demonstrated to one of us their understanding of people in the community who would be able to offer help, as opposed to those who could potentially be friends.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- fully establish a consistently high standard of teaching and learning
- continue to develop the curriculum to support preparation for adulthood by giving older pupils more practical experiences.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynda Morgan
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

We held meetings with you, other leaders, members of the governing body and staff. We also spoke with some parents and held a telephone conversation with a representative of a school with whom you work closely. We visited classrooms with senior leaders and looked at pupils' work. We spoke with pupils in lessons and around the school. Telephone conversations were held with the school improvement advisor and the local authority's school effectiveness officer.

We considered the 10 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents, together with evaluations from the school's own most recent parent survey. We also considered the responses to the pupil and staff surveys.

Various school documents were scrutinised, including safeguarding records, assessment information about pupils' progress, information about behaviour, attendance and safety, and the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan. We also looked at information published on the school's website.