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Ms Kathleen Wall  
Headteacher  
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Dear Ms Wall

### **Short inspection of Harlow Fields School and College**

Following my visit to the school on 3 July 2018 with Mary Rayner, 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 previous inspection.

Since your appointment as substantive headteacher in May 2015, you have established a strong ethos of improvement in the school. You have successfully developed additional provisions across the school to integrate pupils with more complex special needs and accommodate an increased number of pupils. The college part of the school, 16 to 19 provision, has also expanded and more students come from other special schools to join Harlow Fields to benefit from your safe and nurturing provision. Parents are generally very happy with the school and made comments to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, which reflect this. For example, one parent spoke for many by saying: 'Harlow Fields has helped my child grow and develop in ways I never thought possible.'

You have begun to increase and develop middle leaders and now distribute leadership responsibilities more widely. This has helped staff feel valued and have a greater ownership and understanding of the school's work. Staff are overwhelmingly positive about the school and report a sense of pride and belonging. Staff and parents feel that the school is well led and managed. Your evaluation of the school's overall effectiveness is accurate. You and the governors have planned appropriate priorities for school improvement. You are working with staff to take steps to improve facilities and practice in the school further. You have addressed the areas for improvement noted in the previous inspection effectively. For example, all pupils, including the few with moderate learning difficulties, have their thinking and learning extended by challenging teaching.

Governors know the school extremely well. They effectively question and challenge decisions for the benefit of pupils and the school. You ensure that they are given substantial information about the progress of pupils, but are also able to 'unpack' the information and ask informative questions. This enables all leaders to think carefully about the benefits of changes, and how these will improve school practice. Governors feel well supported in their role by the local authority who provide effective challenge and support. For example, the local authority has given training to governors so that they are able to analyse pupils' progress accurately.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

You and your leaders, including governors, have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are well managed, fit for purpose and rigorous. As the designated safeguarding lead, you have a tenacious approach to the safeguarding of pupils and follow up any concerns with relevant agencies. All staff are aware of procedures for reporting concerns and there is good record-keeping of actions and challenge of external agencies for some very complex cases.

Pupils state that they feel safe in school and know how to get help if they need it. As a result, despite complex medical conditions, they come to school as often as they can. The curriculum is supportive of developing a culture of pupils keeping themselves safe and knowing how to manage difficult situations. This was evidenced clearly when the fire alarm went off accidentally at the beginning of the inspection and all procedures were carried out effectively and calmly, causing no distress to pupils. Older pupils learn to manage their behaviour effectively in most situations and are given the opportunity to use these skills in outside situations such as college link courses.

### **Inspection findings**

- At the start of the inspection, we discussed the key lines of enquiry. This inspection focused on: the safeguarding of pupils, the actions taken to improve attendance, the effectiveness and validity of the systems used to measure progress to ensure that it is at least good, and how the curriculum prepares pupils for independence and life beyond school.
- Attendance remains below the national average, but any pupils' absence is checked as soon as possible, typically on the same day. Those pupils with complex medical conditions are supported in school where possible, but this sometimes means their attendance remains low. Where there are specific issues with attendance, these are followed up by you and your leaders quickly, and the appropriate agencies informed and involved.
- You and your leaders have designed rigorous and complex systems to record and monitor pupils' progress in small steps. There are some areas of very good practice, especially in early years, where specific interventions are monitored for their impact on learning. All staff are aware of these procedures and you ensure that they are understood.
- Every pupil has their individual progress monitored in the important areas of

communication, reading, writing and maths skills. You and your leaders are now developing ways of ensuring that these assessments are more accurate. You are working with other schools to check the effectiveness of their judgements of what is considered good progress from starting points within the age-related expectations. This work to improve assessment across the school is not yet fully established and you recognise that more work needs to be done to create a picture of pupils' progress in all areas of development. Targets are not yet specific enough to enable measurable steps to be secure; this makes the checking of all-round progress difficult.

- The learning environment across the school is one of positive encouragement. Relationships between pupils and staff are relaxed and pupils feel that the school is a 'happy place' where there is no bullying. Pupils say that they know how to get help if they need it. Pupils told inspectors they are very excited about their forthcoming production of 'Mary Poppins', which will take place in a local theatre. Pupils feel that the school gives them a sense of 'we can do it'. Parents see the ability to help their children achieve even more as a strength of the school. One parent summed up the views of many by commenting: 'Teaching and support staff are always supportive of my child and actively look to stretch and challenge him.'
- Opportunities for work experience and courses to extend learning outside of school are now more extensive for the 16 to 19 groups. You and your leaders have recognised and taken action to change and improve access to a wider range of opportunities by changing the provider you work with. Pupils now have access to practical courses such as hair and beauty, bricklaying and horticulture. An instructor from the college also works well with students in school, to develop design and technology projects. These courses are appreciated by students and parents and help to prepare students for life beyond school.
- Those with more profound needs in this age group are also included in a 'job board' which encourages appropriate targets such as greetings and work in and around school. However, the culture of safety within the school environment does not lead to enough opportunities for independence skills to be established. There are too few occasions for pupils to work independently from the staff around them. For example, pupils need adult assistance in many cases to leave the room where they are usually taught. While this is appropriate in many aspects of the primary school, it is potentially maintaining pupil's dependence on staff longer than it needs to continue.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- refine systems for the assessment of pupils' progress in all areas of development, and secure further opportunities to compare assessments, targets and standards with a wider group of special schools
- develop the curriculum and the school environment to ensure that pupils are given every opportunity to be as independent as possible.

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

Yours sincerely

Jackie Mullan  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

The inspection was carried out by two inspectors. The inspectors reviewed a range of published information, including the school's website, self-evaluation document and school improvement plan. A range of safeguarding documents, including case studies, as well as records of attendance and follow-up actions were examined.

The inspectors visited a number of teaching sessions, in a variety of subjects often accompanied by senior staff. The inspectors observed pupils' behaviour in and around the school at breaktime, on entry to the school and during the unexpected fire evacuation at the beginning of the day.

The inspectors held meetings with senior staff, the chair of the governing body and the local authority improvement partner for the school. The 17 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and the 13 free-text messages from parents were considered. The inspectors also analysed the 23 responses to Ofsted's staff survey.