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Mrs Alison Woosey
Academy Lead
The Personal Learning Centre
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Dear Mrs Woosey

Short inspection of The Personal Learning Centre

Following my visit to the school on 6 February 2019 with Cole Andrew, 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 outstanding in February 2015.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

You and your team provide excellent support for pupils who have various needs, including emotional and social issues, as well as pregnancy and maternity. These needs have resulted in a lack of engagement with their education in mainstream schools. Many have not attended school at all for some months before they come to you. At The Personal Learning Centre, they find a welcoming and secure environment that enables them to blossom.

You use displays around the school to reinforce important messages and celebrate pupils' achievement. For example, a selection of pupils' written work contributes very effectively to strengthening their self-esteem and spiritual development. The acronym ASPIRE is prominent in various parts of the building. This reminds pupils of the school's core values and aims: aspirations, self-belief, progression, individuality, resilience and enjoyment. The evidence that we saw during the inspection shows that the school's provision fulfils these values exceptionally well.

At the last inspection of your predecessor school, inspectors identified one area for improvement. This was to make the best use of the school's learning mentor to support pupils outside the classroom. You have introduced highly effective systems and strategies that go beyond the expectations of the area for improvement and very successfully address it. You have introduced more-detailed assessment of pupils' needs and aptitudes when they start at the school. You have refined the

pathways that pupils follow while they are there. These recognise that there is a greater range of emotional and mental health needs than there were previously. Pupils now receive stronger support, which very closely matches their needs. For instance, some pupils, who have significant difficulty in attending school initially, benefit from outreach support. This entails teachers going to pupils' homes to teach them and rebuild their confidence. These actions and strategies contribute significantly to the very strong progress that pupils make.

You and your staff have high expectations of your pupils. As a result, pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent and their conduct is exemplary. They benefit greatly from warm and supportive relationships with staff, which help them to enjoy their time at school and to do their very best.

I spoke with members of staff during the inspection and analysed their responses to the online staff survey. Staff were overwhelmingly positive about their work in school. They appreciate the training that leaders provide, which enables them to continue to strengthen their practice. They said that you and your senior leaders are very approachable and are open to listening to suggestions for improvement.

Parents who conveyed their opinions to the inspection team were also very positive about the experiences that their children have in school. They said that leaders accurately assess the underlying causes of the difficulty that their children have in accessing mainstream education. They feel that their children make excellent progress with both their emotional and their academic development during their time at the school. They find that staff are very approachable and communicate openly and honestly with them about their children's progress and safety.

The school and the local authority enjoy a very constructive relationship. The local authority holds the school in high regard and greatly values the support that it provides. Clear and open communication contributes very effectively to securing the most appropriate provision for vulnerable pupils in the area.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. The designated lead for safeguarding responds promptly to any concerns about pupils' safety or welfare. When necessary, she makes referrals to agencies such as social care without delay. The school's record of checks on members of staff meets the government's current requirements. Leaders ensure that their recruitment procedures test candidates' understanding of safeguarding protocols and processes.

There is a very strong culture of safeguarding in the school. Ongoing training for staff covers a wide range of issues beyond statutory requirements, taking account of risks associated with the needs and backgrounds of pupils. Staff are highly knowledgeable about various signs of abuse. They also know their pupils very well and care about them deeply. You and your staff ensure that pupils learn in a safe environment that helps to improve their life chances. Pupils are happy to come to

school and feel safe and secure.

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed a number of key lines of enquiry. One key line of enquiry related to attendance. Although the proportion of pupils who are absent from school is above the national average, leaders ensure that individual pupils' attendance improves substantially once they start at the school. Furthermore, overall attendance in the current year has almost doubled compared to the last school year. These improvements are a direct result of the carefully targeted support that pupils receive, which produces greatly improved engagement and excellent progress.
- My next key line of enquiry concerned the progress of current pupils in English and mathematics. Evidence from pupils' work and the school's assessment information shows that progress is very strong from low starting points. This includes very successful reintegration into mainstream schools where appropriate. Teachers' strong subject knowledge enables them to plan lessons that provide very well-targeted challenge for pupils, given their needs. Teachers are highly adept at asking questions that encourage pupils to think for themselves. Leaders and teachers use assessment very effectively to establish gaps in pupils' learning. They then put strategies in place to fill these, such as extra sessions in English and mathematics. Some pupils follow a learning pathway that takes them to the end of Year 11. These pupils manage to progress so well that they achieve GCSEs in these subjects, typically at grades 1 to 3.
- Another focus for the inspection centred on the school's curriculum. We found that the school provides a curriculum that is very effective in securing strong social and emotional development, as well as strong progress in English and mathematics. Pupils have access to a total of five GCSE courses, demonstrating ambition and aspiration, alongside receiving lessons in subjects such as art and religious education. Leaders provide careers lessons every week, which inform pupils of the range of options available to them after key stage 4. There are also activities to enhance the formal curriculum. Through these, pupils acquire very valuable skills, such as those relevant to independent travel, money management and social interaction. However, the range of subjects on offer is not wide enough and does not fully take into account pupils' own interests and preferences.
- The final key line of enquiry was whether leaders, especially trustees, understand their statutory responsibilities. Trustees are very knowledgeable about their roles. They are well trained in matters of safeguarding, including the 'Prevent' duty. They have a very secure understanding of the quality of education that the school provides. They are highly ambitious and are very thorough in their systems for challenging school leaders. There are clear lines of communication between trustees and members of the local governing board, who provide valuable support and advice to trustees to aid them in the process of holding leaders to account. The work of trustees contributes substantially to the high quality of provision at the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they broaden the range of curriculum options available to take further into account pupils' interests and preferences.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Bolton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Quinn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The team inspector and I carried out short visits to classrooms in all year groups. These were joint activities with you and the deputy headteacher. We scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation summary, action plans for school improvement, records of incidents of bullying and misbehaviour, minutes of meetings of the board of trustees and records connected with the safeguarding of pupils. We held discussions with senior leaders, other members of staff, trustees, governors and pupils. We also spoke with a representative of the local authority. We held discussions on the telephone with parents, headteachers of local schools and with post-16 providers. We analysed the school's own assessment information and a sample of pupils' work. I evaluated one response received through Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, and six responses to the staff survey.