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Mrs Rachel Burstow
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Burstow

Short inspection of Hill Park School

Following my visit to the school on 13 February 2019 with Emma Phillips, 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 October 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of outstanding as a result of this inspection.**

Since the last inspection, the school has undergone significant expansion through its merger with another special school on a nearby site, in September 2018. You and your leadership team have worked tirelessly to support staff through the challenges created by establishing a new school across two sites. Your efforts to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both schools have enabled you to accurately identify where there is best practice and where improvements are needed. Your vision, for 'a positive, dynamic school community, providing personalised learning that enables each child to feel proud, confident and valued for their achievements', drives the changes you are making. This is evident in the areas you are focusing on in the school improvement plan.

You have established a calm and purposeful school that reflects your commitment to providing the best for all pupils. You and your leadership team are ambitious for pupils and determined to provide the opportunities that they need to succeed. Staff, parents, carers and governors are highly appreciative of your inspirational and considerate leadership. You are approachable and listen to their views. As a result, they are committed to your vision and the actions you have identified for taking the school forward. Staff told us that they are clear and positive about the expectations

of the new leadership structures that will be in place. Parents told us that you 'are clearly passionate' and 'doing an excellent job to bring both schools together'.

You told us that you have not yet been able to establish consistent policies and practice across the whole school and further improvements are needed. Well-considered plans for developing a curriculum and an assessment system which meet the needs of all pupils are still to be embedded.

Pupils enjoy coming to school and are motivated and enthusiastic. They behave exceptionally well and are considerate of each other. They show respect for the adults supporting them and are welcoming to visitors. They told inspectors that they enjoy swimming and riding lessons, which are off site, and think that their school is 'amazing'.

Parents who spoke to inspectors were overwhelmingly positive about the support received and progress their children have made since joining the school. They praised the school's holistic approach and excellent communication, saying that these help to alleviate any anxieties. One parent, who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, described Hill Park as 'a fantastic school where staff take the time to really know the child,' and another wrote, 'the progress is amazing and a joy to watch'. Parents recognise the challenges that the merger has brought, but are confident in your leadership to successfully bring the schools together to benefit all pupils.

Staff are proud to work at this school. Teaching and support staff welcome your openness and willingness to listen. They are confident to approach leaders with their ideas and concerns, and recognise the value that you place on their well-being. They can see that new initiatives are being planned with clear structures and expectations that will bring together the 'best of both schools', and result in enhanced provision. They share your principle that 'children come first'.

The governing body has been formed with representation from both schools. Governors have worked hard to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the new school in order to be able to provide you with appropriate support and challenge. They are focused on ensuring that a high standard of education is maintained during and after the merger and that pupils' outcomes remain strong. Governors have been closely involved in the development of the new school's vision and staffing structures. They make regular visits to the school to observe learning and meet with staff and leaders. Governors are also looking beyond the school to improve their practice, and are working with other special schools and community organisations. Governors are aware that they need to ensure that all the information on the website reflects the policies and development of the whole school.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your team have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that pupils' safety has the highest priority. There is a strong culture of safeguarding that runs throughout the school. Senior leaders and governors are

trained in safer recruitment. Regular training for staff and governors means that they receive frequent updates about a wide range of safeguarding matters. Daily briefings for staff make certain that all are kept informed about any current concerns. Staff are clear about the processes for reporting and there are detailed records of all concerns raised and actions taken. Strong partnerships with parents, and effective communication with a range of agencies ensure that pupils are kept safe. Leaders are confident to challenge agencies when their response is slow or perceived not to be in the best interests of the pupil.

The school provides a caring and supportive environment in which pupils thrive and families are supported. Pupils learn about how to keep themselves safe, for example in relation to online safety and the dangers of sexting. The development of an emotional well-being curriculum demonstrates the commitment of leaders to ensuring that pupils have the social and emotional skills to keep themselves safe beyond the school.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we examined how well leaders have continued to improve the school's effectiveness and addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. We particularly looked at the progress pupils are making from their starting points and how the quality of teaching and assessment supports them to make good or better progress. We focused on how well the curriculum supports learning and prepares pupils for their next steps in education and into adulthood. We examined how well additional funding is used and its impact on the outcomes of vulnerable pupils. We also evaluated the effectiveness of safeguarding.
- As a result of teachers' high expectations, most pupils are making good progress in their learning over time. Additional funding has been used effectively to focus on the development of pupils' communication skills and to support their social, emotional and mental health needs. Leaders regularly monitor progress, with teachers, to identify the next steps in learning for the individual as well as the whole school's areas for development.
- However, observations of lessons, together with the scrutiny of pupils' work, demonstrate that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not consistently strong across the whole school. Leaders have correctly identified that not all teachers use the information they have effectively, about what pupils can already do and understand, to plan activities that consistently match pupils' needs. Teachers and teaching assistants generally encourage pupils to make choices and develop independence, which supports their learning.
- The curriculum is not explained as clearly as it should be on the school's website. Inspectors considered how well you have designed and implemented the curriculum. You have a clear vision for the school and know how you want the curriculum to support pupils' learning to prepare them well for their next steps and life in modern Britain. Pupils have a broad and balanced curriculum, with access to a variety of trips and experiences to enhance their enjoyment of learning. However, the opportunities to develop vocational learning and work-

related skills are more limited. The pupils we spoke to were particularly enthusiastic about their learning in mathematics, as well as the residential opportunities available to them, including the Duke of Edinburgh Award in key stage 4. Pupils responding to Ofsted's online questionnaire, however, told us that they did not feel well-enough prepared for the next stage of their education, in terms of the careers information provided. Inspectors observed that for some pupils with more complex needs, there is a more personalised curriculum which responds effectively to their individual needs and is supported by an appropriate environment for learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- well-considered plans for consistent policy and practice are fully embedded across the whole school
- the information about what pupils can already do and understand is used consistently well to plan activities that match pupils' needs
- the curriculum is further developed to provide more practical learning opportunities and careers education to support transition into adulthood.

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

Yours sincerely

Helen Johns
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you to discuss the school's self-evaluation and plans for improvement. We met with a group of pupils as well as with a group of parents to hear their views about the school. We also spoke to some pupils in class and looked through their work. We held meetings with key staff about the monitoring of pupils' progress, the curriculum and safeguarding. I met with members of the governing body and with a representative of the local authority. We observed learning across subjects and year groups with members of the senior leadership team.

Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including the school's self-evaluation and development plan. The school's safeguarding arrangements were evaluated. We considered 13 responses to Ofsted's pupil survey, 66 responses to the staff survey and 23 responses to Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, Parent View, including 15 free-text comments.