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Mrs Katherine Seymour
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Dear Mrs Seymour

Short inspection of Dorchester Learning Centre

Following my visit to the school on 26 February 2019 with Andrew Brown, 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 March 2015.

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 good as a result of this inspection.**

Since the previous inspection, the school has faced significant challenges, disruptions, and changes. There is now a new leadership team in place and the school has moved to a new site. You lead with courage and determination. In a short time, you have created a positive, forward-thinking team that works together cohesively to continue to make the improvements needed. Through a period of intense scrutiny, you have remained focused on making the changes. Your reflective approach allows you to make the most of advice from local school leaders and others.

Due to the upheavals experienced by the school, several of the recommendations for improvement identified at the previous inspection remain as priorities for the school. Only recently have leaders been able to focus on the quality of the education provided.

Despite this context, the school is a calm, positive place in which to learn. Staff are skilled at ensuring that pupils, who often come with gaps in their education or with experiences at several different schools, settle in quickly and soon feel part of the school community. Your headline vision, 'one pupil, one plan', describes the focus on the nurturing of the individual and the aim to develop a personalised approach to

meet the needs of every pupil.

A strength is the positive relationship formed between staff and pupils. Pupils say that behaviour is good as 'everyone is where they are meant to be, and we take a pride in our work'. Pupils' workbooks confirm that most try their best and present their work well. Staff ensure that pupils have strong support during lessons. On occasion, this support limits how well pupils learn to work things out for themselves and therefore how resilient they are when faced with challenges.

You form strong links with the hospital school. Staff feel included as part of the school. They provide learning in a well-resourced room or at pupils' bedsides, as needed. As a result, pupils learn, despite the medical barriers they may face, and feedback from parents and carers is positive. You are not complacent. Plans are in place to improve the links with local schools so that learning experiences for pupils while at the hospital match their learning experiences at school even more closely.

Safeguarding is effective.

The culture of safeguarding is strong. Leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The safety and security of pupils are at the heart of your actions and you and other leaders do not hesitate to challenge other agencies if you see that there needs to be more rapid intervention. Recruitment checks are appropriately completed. The designated leader for safeguarding ensures that staff receive training, including information about local known risks, and frequent updates. The management committee has thorough knowledge of its responsibilities regarding safeguarding and committee members make visits to the school to check processes and procedures.

Daily briefing meetings help staff to share important up-to-date information about pupils. This supports staff to be proactive in providing support for pupils to help keep them safe. Pupils say that they feel safe and that any bullying issues, should they occur, are resolved quickly and effectively.

Inspection findings

- We looked at how well leaders improve the quality of teaching and learning, and, in particular, how well pupils develop their reading and writing skills. This was an area for improvement identified at the previous inspection and it remains a current area for improvement in your development plan. This is because you and your leadership team recognise that there are subjects and activities where pupils could develop their reading and writing skills further. Too often, pupils do not use and apply these skills. As a result, they sometimes do not make the progress they could in these areas.
- In addition, although developing the teaching of literacy is on the school development plan, the actions, the monitoring, and the expected differences the improvements will make to pupils' outcomes are not clear. This means that you and other leaders, including governors, are not able to check how well the school is moving forward or how well pupils' outcomes are improving.

- We also looked at how well the school ensures that pupils are prepared for their future education or employment. This included talking to pupils about their aspirations and we looked at the career guidance and work experience opportunities offered. We examined pupils' individual plans to check that these help pupils, their parents, and staff to know what pupils' next steps are.
- Staff collect a wide range of information about pupils' needs and achievements and there are plans, in different formats, for each pupil. As a result, staff know pupils well and parents receive high-quality information about how well their children are doing at the school. What is not as clear from the range of plans is precisely what pupils' next steps to achieve their desired learning outcomes are.
- You ensure that pupils receive careers advice as they approach their last two years at the school. There are some opportunities for pupils to experience work placements to prepare them for future employment and to help them to plan for their future careers. You have plans in place to extend these opportunities and to provide career guidance at an earlier age.
- Finally, we explored how well leaders and the management committee work together to ensure that the school remains good. You, your leadership team, and the management committee are proud of the steps taken over the past two years to rectify some significant weaknesses and to stabilise the school. This is evidence of how well you and other leaders identify the key areas to work on and take the right action, using external advice when necessary. The local authority confirms that the school has made significant movements forwards.
- The focus of your work now is, quite rightly, to embed the changes made and to continue to improve the quality of education. You work with local authority officers to define how the school continues to meet the needs of pupils within the community, into the future.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders continue to work in close partnership with the local authority to secure a coherent plan and vision for the future of the school
- the systems for checking the quality of education are embedded and developed further
- the school development plan provides sufficient details about planned improvements to the quality of teaching and learning
- teachers and teaching assistants provide the right balance of support and challenge so that pupils achieve as well as they are able
- pupils apply and improve their reading and writing skills throughout the curriculum
- individual plans clearly identify the next steps for pupils
- more is done to raise pupils' aspirations further and to prepare them for their next steps in education or employment.

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

Yours sincerely

Tonwen Empson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with senior leaders, middle leaders, staff, and members of the management committee. They also spoke on the telephone to a representative of the local authority. Together with leaders, inspectors visited classes to observe learning, look at pupils' books and speak to them about their school. Inspectors looked at a range of documents, including improvement plans and those relating to safeguarding. An inspector visited the schoolroom at the Kingfisher Ward at Dorchester Hospital to meet with staff there. Inspectors took into account two responses to Parent View, feedback from parents received by the school, a small number of responses provided by pupils to an online survey and the 26 responses to a staff survey.