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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



2 April 2019

Mrs Christine Fraser
Interim Executive Headteacher
Mary Elliot School
Leamore Lane
Walsall
West Midlands
WS2 7NR

Dear Mrs Fraser

Short inspection of Mary Elliot School

Following my visit to the school on 12 March 2019 with Jane Edgerton, 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.

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.**

Changes in senior leadership, and the absence of a permanent headteacher since January 2017, have contributed to a lack of continuity in school improvement. As a result, pupils do not achieve as well as they did in the past. You took on the interim executive headship of the school eight weeks ago. In this short time, you have started to identify several areas for development, such as revising the school's curriculum and overhauling the assessment system to make these fit for purpose. This has begun to stem the decline in standards and address some of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. The governing body has appointed a permanent executive headteacher to take up post from April 2019.

You have a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. However, the actions in the school development plan do not address sufficiently well the areas for improvement identified in the school's self-evaluation. In addition, while middle leaders are assigned to different elements of the school's provision, such as assessment or pupils' transition, their responsibilities are not clearly defined. This means that they have been less successful in monitoring teachers' work and bringing about improvements in their areas of responsibility.

Teachers' use of assessment to inform their planning of appropriate learning activities for pupils remains an area of concern. This means that learning often lacks

focus and teachers are unable to accurately determine what progress pupils have made. You are aware of this and have started to address this weakness. The new approach to recording assessment information and checking on pupils' progress is likely to help teachers identify appropriate next steps for learning. However, the system is not yet fully embedded and is used inconsistently by staff. Therefore, its impact in ensuring that pupils access the right learning opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding is reduced.

Very recently, you designed a new curriculum that provides pupils with more opportunities to develop communication, cognition and learning skills while meeting their sensory, therapeutic and emotional well-being needs. This curriculum provides a more individualised approach and aims to equip pupils with the skills they need to become engaged and valued members of society.

Pupils behave well in lessons and around school. This creates a positive and supportive learning environment where pupils are always ready to try their best. Pupils told inspectors that they like school and enjoy their lessons. Pupils feel that bullying does not happen at the school, and that if they had a concern they could speak to, or communicate with, staff. The recent development of the school council has empowered pupils and given them a voice. For example, members of the school council have met with local councillors to share their views about transport to and from school.

Staff speak positively about the culture at the school and the team spirit. They feel that the appointment of the new executive headteacher will provide stability for the school moving forward. Staff say that leaders actively support their professional development. They are aware of the school's areas for development and show commitment to working hard to get the best outcomes for pupils.

The governing body is confident that you have started to address areas of weakness and that this should move the school forward. Governance has strengthened since the school federated with Old Hall School. Governors hold regular meetings, visit the school to see pupils at work, and have a growing understanding of the school's current strengths and areas for development.

Parents and carers expressed mixed views about the school. A number of parents, understandably, expressed concerns about the lack of permanent leadership at the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a priority for leaders and staff, and there is a culture of keeping pupils safe in the school. The designated safeguarding lead manages this aspect of the school's work effectively. The lead is supported by a team of trained deputy designated safeguarding leads who carry out their responsibilities well in the absence of the lead. Every member of staff understands their role in safeguarding, and takes the necessary steps to help pupils stay safe. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

You have ensured that staff are well trained and kept up to date about safeguarding

issues. Leaders and staff have a strong understanding of their responsibilities and the processes for reporting concerns. Referrals are timely, and appropriate action is taken when required to protect pupils from harm. Designated safeguarding leads follow up all concerns referred to the local authority.

Leaders make sure that recruitment procedures for new staff are thorough. They carry out all the required checks to ensure that adults are suitable to work with children. Pupils, staff and parents correctly believe that pupils are safe, both in and around school.

Inspection findings

- In January 2018, Mary Elliot School federated with a local primary special school, Old Hall School. This has started to have a positive impact on improving the quality of education. The federation has brought fresh opportunities for the two schools to share good practice and engage in joint leadership ventures. For example, the schools now share a governing body. This has raised the level of experience and knowledge of governors so that they can more effectively hold leaders to account for the quality of provision at the school.
- You have identified that previous assessment information did not give an accurate view of the outcomes for all pupils across the school. This has meant that leaders and managers have not been able to identify precisely which aspects of teaching and learning need attention.
- Leaders' recent evaluations of the quality of teaching show that it is not consistently good across the school. Inspectors' findings concur with this view. Teaching sometimes lacks focus, meaning that it is unclear what skills the pupils need to learn. Where teaching and learning are strongest, teaching assistants are well deployed and staff use targeted strategies to engage pupils at an appropriate level. This is particularly evident for the teaching of those pupils with the most complex and profound needs. In these cases, staff often use a range of communication strategies and resources well to engage pupils in their learning.
- Leaders have put procedures in place to chase up pupils who are not in school each day to find out why they are absent. Leaders have secured effective partnerships with external services to ensure that when a pupil's attendance becomes a concern, an action plan is implemented. Leaders have also put in place monitoring systems to check when pupils are not in school. This includes regular phone calls and visits to the pupil's home. As a result of these initiatives, attendance has started to improve and the number of pupils who are persistently absent has reduced.
- Leaders' use of additional government funding to support the needs of disadvantaged pupils and other vulnerable pupils is effective. This includes support from learning mentors, targeted intervention groups, improved staffing ratios for some groups, professional services and residential experiences. This has supported effectively the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the recently introduced system to improve assessment is firmly embedded and used consistently well by staff to ensure a better match of work to pupils' needs
- the actions in the school development plan are closely aligned with leaders' self-evaluation findings so that weaknesses are addressed promptly
- middle leadership at the school is strengthened so that these leaders have a more direct impact on raising standards across their areas of responsibility.

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

Yours sincerely

Christopher Pollitt
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

To explore the main areas of enquiry for this inspection, inspectors met with you, senior leaders, the school staff and governors, and spoke to a representative from the local authority. They also met with parents at the beginning of the school day to discuss their children's welfare and progress, and with community transport staff who are responsible for escorting pupils to and from the school. Inspectors spoke with pupils informally and met with a group of pupils to discuss their learning and school experiences. They met with staff formally and informally to discuss the school's progress since the last inspection.

Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents, including work in pupils' books, curriculum folders, the single central record, safeguarding documents, behaviour documents, physical intervention and attendance records, and pupils' assessment information. They visited lessons in the department for pupils with severe learning difficulties, the department for pupils with autism spectrum disorder, and the sensory engagement and therapeutic department.

Inspectors considered the views of the 12 parents who contacted Ofsted through the online questionnaire, Parent View, and the free-text service. There were three responses from staff to the online staff questionnaire, and no responses from pupils to the online pupil questionnaire.