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Dear Mr Palladino

Short inspection of The South Downs School

Following my visit to the school on 26 March 2019 with Charles Joseph, 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 South Downs School was judged to be outstanding in June 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

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

You lead the school with a clear determination to ensure that all pupils fully engage in learning and make extremely strong progress from their starting points. You are supported ably by your senior leadership team, whose members share both your vision and your care for the pupils. Teachers and support staff hold the same very high expectations that all pupils should achieve their best. All of the staff who offered a view said that they were proud to be a member of staff and that they enjoy their work. As a result of your firm commitment and strong leadership, pupils receive exceptional levels of support and thrive at The South Downs School.

Pupils told inspectors that they enjoy coming to the school. They said that staff support them well by helping them understand their own feelings. At the start of the day, pupils join their classes quickly and are ready to learn from the outset, assisted by a volunteer team of pupils that welcomes everyone in and a separate team that is recruited to say 'goodbye' at the end of the day. The routines and values you have established are respected by all, resulting in exemplary behaviour throughout the school. An overwhelming majority of parents and carers are supportive of the school. They feel that it is 'professional, with every need accounted for'. One parent stated: 'The school will help with any issue and is completely inclusive.'

Leaders and governors have successfully addressed the one area identified for improvement at the previous inspection. Advances in the use of technology throughout all areas of the school have had a considerable impact on developing pupils' learning, particularly with encouraging pupils' engagement in the rich and balanced curriculum.

Across all facets of the school, pupils are achieving very strongly. The curriculum is inspiring and imaginative, and teaching is typically highly effective. Lessons are carefully planned to ensure that pupils can access learning at an appropriate level for them. The effective use of support staff is exemplary, as they consistently help pupils to achieve their goals. There is a strong focus on understanding the specific needs of individuals. It permeates throughout the school, creating a calm, reflective and understanding atmosphere. Successes of all kinds are celebrated. When challenges arise, which are potentially of all types, pupils and staff work together diligently to overcome them.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The single central record details accurately the robust pre-employment and background checks carried out on staff and other adults before they are engaged to work in the school. Adults are trained appropriately in all areas of safeguarding and know what actions to take to keep pupils safe from harm.

The designated safeguarding lead and the safeguarding team work effectively with other agencies to make sure that pupils are safe. Staff maintain useful relationships with a range of other professionals to support highly vulnerable pupils. You proactively seek advice from expert sources whenever you identify opportunities to build on your already effective practice.

You and your staff show the strongest possible commitment to ensuring pupils' well-being. Pupils say that they feel safe and know how to keep themselves safe. They know who to speak to if they have a concern.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, we looked at leaders' actions to ensure that all aspects of safeguarding are effective, including attendance. We also considered how effectively leaders work with other professional bodies and the community, including parents and carers, to ensure that all pupils make strong progress from their starting points. We evaluated how well the governing body holds leaders to account in order to ensure the continuing success of the school.
- Leaders are diligent in ensuring that all pupils are safe. A rigorous assessment of each individual pupil's needs is carried out and reviewed frequently, resulting in the implementation of highly effective plans. These plans are skilfully tailored to maximise pupils' progress, both pastorally and academically. Key staff challenge absence and have high expectations of pupils' regular attendance. Monitoring routines are robust. When pupils do not attend school, staff work determinedly to

find out why they are absent and to establish where they are. Pupils respond well to this high level of care, and many are attending more regularly. Leaders work hard to involve outside agencies and rigorously follow up necessary actions.

- You have designed a curriculum that focuses directly on pupils' learning needs, and which has transformed learning. For example, in a lesson observed by an inspector, pupils used a wide variety of activities and resources to develop their skills, particularly in communication. They took part with enjoyment and confidence. In addition, middle leaders are taking an increasingly important role in developing and refining both what is taught and how the curriculum is delivered.
- Additional funding, including the pupil premium, is used effectively to remove the barriers to learning for pupils who are disadvantaged. Leaders robustly assess the effectiveness of their plans and review them frequently. When required, they take swift and appropriate action to ensure that all specific funds are used to maximum effect.
- You have a strong, passionate and committed governing body. Governors bring a range of skills to the strategic leadership of the school. Their wider knowledge and expertise have enabled you to improve accountability at all levels and have helped to raise standards. Despite this, you have correctly recognised that the recruitment of additional governors will help meet the increasing demands on those already in place, particularly given the speed of growth within the multi-academy trust.
- Members of the governing body are rigorous in their pursuit of high standards. They challenge leaders during scheduled meetings and visit the school regularly to check the validity of leaders' reports. Like senior leaders, governors have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and are keen to search for methods of improvement. They appreciate the excellent work of staff and are keen to support you with the school's next steps.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to share their expertise within the trust, while ensuring that key staff and governors can maintain their current high standards.

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

Yours sincerely

Gary Tostevin
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

The inspection team observed teaching and learning and scrutinised samples of pupils' work in all phases. All observations were undertaken jointly with senior leaders. We held meetings with you, the chief executive officer, senior leaders, teachers and support staff, as well as with the chair of the governing body and two governors.

We scrutinised a range of documents, including: leaders' evaluations of the school's performance; minutes of the governing body's meetings; policies; safeguarding records; records of pupils' attendance and behaviour; and information about pupils' progress. We also scrutinised the school's website. We spoke to pupils during the day. We considered the views of staff and took account of the 38 responses to Ofsted's online survey Parent View, including 20 free-text comments.