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5 September 2019

Ms Antonia Jackson
Head of School
Aspire Academy Bexley
South Gipsy Road
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Dear Ms Jackson

No formal designation inspection of Aspire Academy Bexley

Following my visit with Sam Hainey, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 16–17 July 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about safeguarding arrangements at the academy. The inspection was unannounced.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record of staff recruitment checks and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. Meetings were held with the head of school, executive headteacher, safeguarding leader for the New Horizons federation of schools and other senior leaders. Inspectors spoke with staff informally throughout the inspection and held a formal meeting with them. Inspectors met with two groups of pupils formally and held informal discussions with pupils throughout the inspection. Inspectors visited all classrooms at various times of the day, observed pupils arriving each morning and looked at the lunchtime and breaktime arrangements. They spoke to representatives of the local authority and met with the chair of governors. Inspectors met with several parents and carers during the inspection and spoke to others on the telephone. Inspectors looked at information related to pupils' behaviour and attendance and reviewed minutes of governing body meetings.

Having considered the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

The school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs, and an increasing proportion have additional needs, including autism spectrum disorder. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. There are currently 49 pupils on roll. Although there are more boys than girls on roll, the proportion of girls has increased steadily over the past three years.

The school is part of the London South East Academies Trust. The executive headteacher, who is also the director of education for the trust, works across three schools. Following a period of absence, the previous head of school left his post in February 2019. At this time, the deputy headteacher took on the role as interim head of school until the substantive head of school joined in April 2019. The special educational needs coordinator started her role in September 2018, having been a teacher at the school before this.

Safeguarding arrangements

Leaders ensure that all the required checks are carried out to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children. The single central record of these checks is compliant. Leaders ensure that key staff, including the chair of governors, are trained in safe recruitment practices.

Staff are well trained in all aspects of safeguarding. They understand how to report and record any concerns they have about pupils' welfare and safety. Staff are alert to the signs that may indicate a pupil is at risk. The designated safeguarding lead, together with other appropriately trained leaders, ensures that all records of concern are addressed swiftly and effectively. In all discussions with inspectors, staff demonstrated a strong understanding of their responsibility to keep pupils safe and the procedures to follow to report allegations.

Leaders and other staff demonstrate a deep understanding of the school's context and the additional vulnerabilities of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Leaders ensure that the training programme for staff is tailored to meet the changing context of the school. For example, leaders have established a programme of training for staff that focuses on supporting pupils who experience or have experienced trauma.

A strength of the school's safeguarding practice is how well all staff know the pupils. Staff have an in-depth understanding of all pupils and their families. Pupils' individual risk assessments and pastoral support plans are reviewed and updated regularly so that all staff understand what works best for each pupil. Leaders and other staff meet at the start and end of each day to discuss pupils' safety and behaviour. Inspectors joined these briefings and observed how information is shared so that all matters are dealt with swiftly and no time is wasted in making sure each pupil has the support they need. Staff told inspectors that these sessions are extremely useful in keeping up to date with pupils' welfare and in deciding which strategies or interventions individual pupils may need to help them to have a

safe and successful day at school.

Leaders' work with other professionals, including social services, is strong. Child protection records are detailed, well organised and robust. These demonstrate the close attention to detail that is placed on individual pupils' welfare.

Leaders are reflective. When incidents happen, they review these thoroughly and look at lessons learned from them. Inspectors spoke to representatives of the local authority, who know the school well. They reported that leaders communicate with them effectively and respond to all concerns swiftly. The chair of governors, who is also the nominated governor for safeguarding, liaises with leaders regularly and ensures that the statutory duties related to safeguarding are met.

Leaders take pupils' attendance seriously. As a result of rigorous and effective procedures, including telephone calls to parents, home visits and weekly meetings between leaders, pastoral teams and the safeguarding lead for the New Horizons federation of schools, pupils' attendance is high. Given some pupils' very poor attendance in previous settings, this demonstrates the positive impact of leaders' work in this area. All absences are followed up and analysed closely. Staff effectively establish pastoral support plans to help the pupils who struggle to attend regularly.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons and during social times is usually calm and orderly. They know the school rules and respond well to the positive relationships with staff. Staff praise and encourage pupils, offering guidance and support. Pupils told inspectors that staff understand how best to help them, particularly in calming them down when they are angry or upset. However, some pupils struggle to self-regulate their behaviour. Although staff support pupils well, the use of therapeutic intervention is inconsistent, partly due to some instability with staffing this year. Leaders have identified the need to increase and improve the use of therapies, including speech and language and occupational therapy. Plans are in place to ensure that these will be delivered more consistently from the beginning of September 2019.

Staff are well trained in de-escalation strategies and other approaches to manage pupils' challenging behaviour and keep them safe. Inspectors saw these procedures being used successfully with different pupils during the inspection. When positive handling is used to make sure pupils and their peers are safe, all the relevant information is recorded in detail. In line with the school's policy, parents are informed in all situations and a debrief takes place with leaders as soon as is practicable.

While leaders and other staff monitor pupils' behaviour closely and have a detailed understanding of individual pupils, they do not analyse information related to pupils' behaviour deeply enough to look for patterns and trends to inform their decisions and tailor support for pupils even more effectively. Although governors receive information about the number of incidents, including those that require positive handling, they do not have enough information about leaders' actions to reduce these incidents over time.

All pupils who spoke with inspectors during the inspection said that they feel safe in

school. They feel confident that adults deal with any issues well. The school's personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) programme is well planned to help pupils to keep themselves safe. For example, pupils learn about the dangers of smoking and how to stay safe online.

Leaders make sure that pupils are well supervised both inside school and when they are out in the playground. For pupils who may try to abscond or climb fences, staff make sure that enhanced risk assessments are in place to keep pupils safe.

Leaders have made enhancements to site security measures, including changes to the front gates of the school. Leaders have put suitable interim measures in place to repair one of the perimeter fences, which belongs to the local authority. Inspectors saw evidence of leaders' work to contact and seek the help of the local authority to address this matter. During this inspection, a representative of the local authority visited the school to reassure inspectors of the interim and long-term plans to improve and replace the fence in question. Leaders must ensure that these plans are implemented to keep the site safe for pupils. Work is due to commence during the upcoming summer holidays.

The school regularly surveys the views of pupils and parents. These surveys are positive about the school's work and ability to keep pupils safe, manage behaviour and deal with any issues that arise. Some parents requested meetings with inspectors to share their positive views of the school. Most parents who met with inspectors or spoke to inspectors on the telephone were very positive about the school's work. Typically, parents praise leaders' actions to keep their children safe and comment on how well all staff understand and support their children's needs. However, some parents raised concerns about the fencing around the school site, and others said that communication from leaders could be better. The new head of school has started to implement plans to work more closely with parents. There is still work to do to improve partnerships with parents so that they understand and contribute to the work of the school more effectively.

External support

The school benefits from the support of others in the trust. The head of school at one of the other academies has supported leaders in reviewing safeguarding arrangements. The central team within the trust has been used very effectively to train staff on all aspects of safeguarding, including positive handling and behaviour management.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further improve pupils' ability to manage their own behaviour and personal safety by:
 - sharpening the school's analysis of behaviour information to help inform leaders' decision-making, particularly in reducing the use of positive handling
 - implementing the plans to increase therapeutic support to help meet pupils'

needs more effectively.

- Follow through with the interim and long-term plans to further improve the fencing around the perimeter of the site.
- Build more positive relationships with parents to help them understand and influence the school's work more effectively.

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 Bexley. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gary Rawlings
Ofsted Inspector