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Mr Daryl Charles
Headteacher
The Sutton School and Specialist College
Scotts Green Close
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Dudley
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Dear Mr Charles

No formal designation inspection of The Sutton School and Specialist College

Following my visit with Niall Gallagher Her Majesty's Inspector to your school on 14 January 2020, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This 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 aspects of the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school, including elements of safeguarding.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, a group of pupils, a significant number of staff, the chair of the governing body and other governors, and a representative of the local authority. Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements.

Inspectors briefly visited most classrooms, including the school's reflection room. We talked to pupils informally while they were working. We scrutinised pupils' attendance documents and records relating to behaviour and exclusion. We examined school recruitment processes, school policies and information on the school's website. We met with the deputy designated safeguarding leads and looked at various cases. We reviewed complaints received by Ofsted.

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

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

There are 179 pupils on roll. A small proportion of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Only a few pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is about double the national average. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities and all have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The level of pupil stability is a little below the national figure. Staff turnover is of typical frequency. A new special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) joined the school in September 2019, following the external promotion of the previous SENCo. The headteacher has been in post since September 2016.

Findings

Staff morale in the school is low. Leaders and governors have not acted promptly enough to address staff concerns. While this has not started to have a negative impact on pupils' experiences, it could have if not addressed quickly. Several staff we spoke to believe that leaders show favouritism to some staff. They gave examples of where they perceived this to be the case, such as in recruitment practice. The inspection evidence is that leaders have followed fair recruitment processes when making appointments. Some staff told us that they did not feel comfortable in sharing these concerns with leaders because they felt that it may have a negative impact on their working life. Recently, the chair of the governing body was proactive in gathering staff views through a questionnaire. He has some understanding of the issues, although governors have not taken sufficient action to resolve the acrimonious feeling among many staff. Almost all the staff we spoke to said that they really enjoy their work with pupils.

Staff receive appropriate training in a wide range of safeguarding topics. This helps them to spot signs of abuse and know when it is necessary to report a concern. Leaders have appropriate systems in place for staff to record their concerns about pupils who may be at risk of harm. More recently, reporting has moved to an electronic system that makes record-keeping more efficient and easily accessible. All reports of concern are monitored, and triaged, by a team of trained safeguarding staff. The headteacher maintains responsibility as the main designated safeguarding lead (DSL). Staff investigate concerns appropriately and refer to other agencies as necessary. Wider aspects of safeguarding practice, including the administration of medicines, internet safety and keeping the site safe and secure, are strong.

The safeguarding policy takes into account most, but not all, of the most recent guidance issued by the Department for Education. Despite this, staff have undertaken training in understanding the changes to 'Keeping Children Safe in

Education' September 2019. In addition, the policy does not indicate that the school has moved to an electronic system. Again, despite this inaccuracy, staff know that they are expected to report concerns using the computer-based system (and immediately and verbally to a DSL if serious). Staff are also clear on how to report any worries they have about a member of staff's behaviour. However, leaders have not considered carefully enough the complications that personal staff relationships may have on sharing sensitive safeguarding information with leaders.

The school's safer working practice policy provides clarity on staff conduct. Broadly, staff understand and implement the school's policy well. However, there is some confusion on aspects, such as the use of personal mobile telephones. Therefore, it is essential that governors assure themselves that all policies are implemented consistently.

The recruitment of staff is fair and follows appropriate safer recruitment practice. Several leaders and governors have completed safer recruitment training. Leaders ensure that the correct pre-employment checks are made before staff take up post. They maintain an accurate record of these checks. When opportunities for internal interim positions arise, leaders ensure that these are open to all eligible staff. Where there is more than one suitable candidate, it is usual that there is an interview to assess who is the most suitable candidate for the role.

Governors maintain an oversight of safeguarding, including recruitment. They are informed of any serious incidents involving pupils. They ensure that audits, such as Dudley's school safeguarding self-assessment tool, are completed and acted upon. However, the governing body does not have a comprehensive view of pupils' attendance. Governors believe that attendance is good, when it is actually below the national average. Similarly, the governing body is not as aware as it should be about strained staff relationships in school. If not dealt with, this is likely to lead to a deterioration in leaders' ability to engage with staff, ultimately impacting on the quality of education provided.

Pupils' attendance is below the national average. Leaders have various systems in place to follow up pupils' absence and check on those who are not in school. However, these systems are not always well organised. Communication between staff dealing with attendance is, at times, disorganised. Management oversight is not as strong as it could be. Checks on vulnerable pupils who are not attending school are not consistently coordinated. While not putting pupils at risk, the current system is clunky. Staff know vulnerable pupils and their family situations well. Leaders liaise well with external agencies. This helps to improve pupils' attendance.

Most pupils display good behaviour and enjoy their learning. A minority of pupils present with some very challenging behaviour. The number of exclusions is high when compared with national figures. Leaders say that the increase in exclusions is linked to a change in the school's intake of pupils. The school now admits more pupils whose primary need is social, emotional and mental health (SEMH)

difficulties. However, leaders say that the school is not well equipped or designed to meet the needs of some of these pupils. This group of pupils accounts for the majority of exclusions. Leaders are doing more to meet the needs of these pupils by seeking a blended approach to education, using alternative providers. This is proving successful with some pupils. Leaders have also requested a number of emergency reviews of EHC plans. Pupils' behaviour plans indicate that staff are sometimes not thinking enough about the specific support that pupils with SEMH needs require. However, leaders are meeting face to face with teachers to discuss strategies to help them better manage behaviour.

External support

The school is not in receipt of any external support.

Priorities for further improvement

- Staff morale is low. Leaders must take the views of staff seriously and do more to improve morale. As a matter of urgency, the governing body should take further action to gather a comprehensive view of what is causing staff to feel unhappy in school. They should address these issues so that staff can work together productively to ensure that all staff feel supported and valued. This should reduce the risk of staff morale having a potential negative impact on pupils.
- Not all those responsible for attendance have a clear understanding of each pupil's attendance profile. Leaders should sharpen processes around attendance to ensure that actions to promote pupils' attendance are well coordinated. Governors should work towards a better understanding of the reasons for the school's attendance patterns.
- The rate of exclusion is rising. Leaders should review specific behaviour programmes for pupils with SEMH needs to ensure that they are more closely matched to pupils' individual needs.
- Staff do not always follow guidance in school policies. Leaders and governors should ensure that all staff understand the policies. They should hold staff to account if they deviate from agreed policies. Governors should ensure that the safeguarding policy contains all relevant information as advised by the Secretary of State.

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

Yours sincerely

Tim Hill
Her Majesty's Inspector