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Mrs Diane Wolstenholme
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Wolstenholme

Short inspection of Ashgate Specialist Support Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 1 February 2018 with Doreen Davenport, 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in certain areas. This may indicate that the school is improving towards being outstanding. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

You and your staff work with great success to create a school where there is absolute commitment to meeting pupils' needs. The learning environment is well maintained and bright. Parents and carers were overwhelmingly positive about the education you provide, saying the school has a 'family feel'. You promote pupils' overall development well, with a broad programme of visits and activities to enhance the curriculum. You encourage pupils to be independent, for example by taking them on shopping trips or giving them responsibilities during the school day. You teach them to become emotionally resilient through lessons in personal, social and health education and through adults' effective day-to-day care and attention to their welfare.

Governors provide effective challenge and hold leaders to account well. For example, they ask important questions about how effectively you use extra funding to support pupils' achievement. However, you acknowledge that they do not all fully understand the details of the school's next steps for improvement to bring about even stronger progress for pupils.

You have made substantial improvements since the last inspection and have very successfully addressed the areas for improvement identified at that point. You have, year on year, significantly increased the proportion of pupils who make more than expected progress. The most recent assessment information shows that nearly half your pupils make accelerated progress from their various starting points.

You have organised lessons so that teachers now very effectively meet the needs of their pupils. Improved checks on the quality of teaching and learning now include feedback to staff that more precisely centres on pupils' progress and how to maximise it. More detailed tracking and assessment systems, which you constantly refine, give a clearer picture of progress. You also organise weekly training that focuses on pupils' progress, which teaching assistants now attend.

There is now a more focused use of signing in place to support pupils' progress. You have a range of systems, such as sign-supported English, which you use according to pupils' needs. You have also successfully increased pupils' involvement in evaluating their learning. You do this by conveying their next steps in ways appropriate to their needs, including informal discussions and well-targeted questions that encourage them to think for themselves and improve their work.

You have improved parents' involvement in their children's learning. The use of home-school books enables parents and teachers to keep in constant communication about pupils' progress and development. You also provide, for example, workshops on themes such as signing or managing behaviour, which parents find very useful. At parents' evenings, parents enjoy looking at their children's 'My life at Ashgate' file, which is a well-presented summary of each pupil's achievement throughout the year. Parents take these files home to keep when their child leaves Ashgate School and greatly appreciate them.

Your plans for school improvement now have a clear emphasis on constantly improving pupils' achievement, with success criteria that show the intended impact of your actions. For example, your current plan aims to increase the provision of music and art activities, with the intended impact of further developing pupils' communication skills. This improved clarity in your planning contributes well to the strong progress pupils make.

The local authority judges that the school is in a secure position with regard to its development and provides an understandably 'light touch' level of support. There is also a positive working relationship between the school and those at the local authority who are responsible for managing the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

You are always keen to have external evaluation of your work, and to this end you have a separate school improvement adviser. This adviser has a clear view of the school's strengths and areas for further development.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and the electronically stored records are detailed and of high quality. The school's record of the necessary checks on members of staff is a well-organised document and meets requirements. You keep accurate records of staff training. The school site is secure and you carry out appropriate identity checks on visitors to school.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. Staff are knowledgeable and well trained and have a deep understanding of the pupils in their care. They are alert to the possible signs of abuse and have a secure grasp of the school's reporting procedures. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said they feel safe and that adults give them important information on how to stay safe, such as treating strangers with caution. There is virtually no bullying or name-calling.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed certain key lines of enquiry. I have already written about the success with which you have addressed the areas for improvement included in the previous inspection report. I have also written about the effectiveness of safeguarding in the school.
- Another key line of enquiry concerned how well pupils are prepared for the next stage of their education. Inspection evidence and the school's assessment information show that current pupils make excellent progress from their various starting points. The high quality of teaching contributes strongly to this and staff demonstrate very effective skills in questioning and challenging pupils to do their best. For example, I saw pupils in key stage 2 using their imagination and their skills in inference well by devising their own names for 'superheroes' they had created, based on the 'superpowers' they possessed. Others showed they could explain what happens to ice when it is warmed, using simple scientific terms. Leaders of local special secondary schools report that your assessment of pupils' progress is highly accurate and that pupils settle quickly when they move into Year 7.
- My next focus was how successfully leaders are improving pupils' attendance. Pupils' absence has noticeably reduced. For instance, the current overall absence rate is now in line with the national average. The rate of persistent absence for pupils who are disadvantaged has also dropped substantially. You have brought about improvement by successfully applying a range of strategies. These include giving certificates and rewards to pupils with high attendance and keeping in regular contact with parents of persistent absentees.
- Another focus was the extent to which governors understand their statutory responsibilities. The school's website is up to date and complies with regulations. Governors challenge leaders strongly, as evidenced by the minutes of governors' meetings. Governors ask searching questions about matters such as pupils' progress and the effectiveness of the school's use of the pupil premium funding. They hold the headteacher to account effectively for the quality of education the

school provides. You accept, however, that not all governors are clear about the detail of the school's priorities for further development that will ensure even more rapid progress for pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all governors have an equally strong understanding of the school's priorities for improvement so that they are able to hold leaders to account even more effectively.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Quinn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The team inspector and I carried out short visits to the early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2, which were joint activities with you and your deputy headteacher. We scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation summary, action plans for school improvement, records of incidents of bullying and misbehaviour, minutes of meetings of the governing body and records connected with the safeguarding of pupils. We held discussions with senior leaders, other members of staff, governors, parents and pupils. We held discussions on the telephone with headteachers of local schools, including the special school most pupils attend when they finish Year 6. We also spoke with a representative of the local authority and with your school improvement adviser. We analysed the school's own assessment information. We evaluated 19 responses received through Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, and 12 responses to the staff survey. There were no other survey responses.