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Mr David Burdett
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Dear Mr Burdett

Short inspection of Hilltop School

Following my visit to the school on 3 May 2019 with Ofsted Inspector David Penny, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in January 2012.

This school continues to be good.

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

As headteacher, you have worked tirelessly to maintain the good quality of education in the school. You are passionate to 'get it right' for every child. Governors and senior leaders share this commitment and you all strive to achieve the best possible outcomes for the children and young people at Hilltop School.

Pupils work hard in lessons and, despite their difficulties, are determined to complete tasks and to do their best. This is because teachers plan interesting learning activities and effectively support them with their work. Pupils told inspectors that staff help them when they need it and were full of praise for the guidance they received from staff.

Inspectors identified several areas for improvement at the school's last inspection. These were to improve the attendance of a small group of pupils and to ensure that all teaching is as good as the best. They asked leaders to check that all staff support pupils' learning, that learning tasks are matched to pupils' needs and that all pupils receive feedback on their achievements. You have tackled these areas for improvement well. Pupils' attendance has risen over the last three years, and most non-attendance now is because pupils are too ill to come to school. Teaching assistants know pupils' targets and support pupils well in achieving them. This is because teachers have set clear learning targets based on their assessment of pupils.

Pupils receive regular feedback on how well they are doing in lessons, and inspectors saw teachers adjusting work by making it easier or harder to reflect pupils' efforts. However, in a small number of lessons, some pupils were easily able to complete all the tasks set, and could have tackled problems that were more difficult.

Your leaders have termly meetings with class teachers to review the learning and check the progress of their pupils. From these meetings, you look at any extra support a child may need, and plan a range of interventions. You have also developed a system of setting targets and reviewing pupils' progress using workbooks. Scrutiny of these books shows that the majority of pupils make good progress across the academic year in their English and mathematics. However, this system is not yet consistent across the school, as a small number of staff do not record accurately against it.

You strive to meet the needs of all pupils by constantly adapting the curriculum. Classes are organised by age and need, and your team adjusts timetables, staffing and activities to ensure that all pupils receive the lessons they need. Since the last inspection, you have set up two early years classes at a local primary school. This provision is of a high standard, with excellent learning resources and a well-planned early years curriculum. This, combined with the strong early years class on the main site, ensures that your pupils have an excellent start to their education.

Parents and carers are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of your school. They are informed about their child's progress but would love to have even more updates on their child's achievements. They talk about how their son or daughter has been 'transformed' since attending Hilltop. They praise the school's focus on independence and the opportunities their children have to go out into the community. In particular, they praise the support they receive from the interventions team. They describe the team as going 'over and above' in their support to families. One parent's comment sums up the views of many: 'My son used to struggle at his previous school. He now dances to Hilltop full of life and happiness.'

Governors are supportive of school leaders and are ambitious for the school and its pupils. They share your commitment to improving the building and learning resources. They have worked with you to identify additional resources to develop areas such as outdoor breakout spaces. They have been involved in developing school improvement plans, and have taken an active role through class visits to gain a real sense of the impact of these developments, for example your recent work on tracking pupils' progress. Governors challenge the impact of additional government funding, such as pupil premium spending. Governors and leaders of your multi-academy trust understand what is going well in school and what needs to be improved.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. The well-maintained register of staff pre-employment checks meets all statutory requirements.

You and your staff are knowledgeable about the circumstances that arise which make pupils vulnerable, both in and out of school. Staff training about safeguarding and child protection is extensive and refreshed with weekly briefings. Your interventions team works well with families and other agencies to keep pupils safe. You make sure that concerns about pupils are identified and reported immediately. As a result, prompt action is taken to keep pupils safe and protect them from harm.

Inspection findings

- You have invested heavily in an interventions team which supports pupils and their families. The work of the team is planned carefully and, because of this, pupils make good progress, not only in their basic skills, but also in developing good behaviour, both at school and at home.
- Children in the early years quickly make progress from their low starting points. Progress in communication and interaction is a particular strength. This is because staff are skilled and consistent in how they respond to all children's attempts to communicate. Children are taught to make choices and to express their needs. Staff celebrate every child's success, and this builds a solid foundation for their learning and development in key stage 1.
- In most lessons, pupils demonstrate high levels of engagement and interest in their work. Staff support pupils to solve problems and to complete tasks independently. However, some pupils, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder, are heavily dependent upon staff. The use of visual support would help these pupils to increase their independence.
- Pupils make good progress in speaking and listening, reading, mathematics and their personal and social development. Pupils' progress in writing is not as strong. Leaders have identified writing as an area for development across the school and have plans in place to support teachers in further developing this area.
- Students in the 14 to 19 department are confident learners. They undertake a range of award-bearing courses and qualifications, including GCSE physical education, construction, employability and personal progress. They are ambitious for their futures, want to attend college and, in some cases, gain employment. All leavers go on to further education or training. You ensure that students are well prepared for the next stage of their education by offering a curriculum which has as its focus preparation for adulthood. Inspectors observed lessons where students were running a school fruit and vegetable shop, preparing snacks and learning to keep safe online and when in the community. Staff promote pupils' independence by allowing students time to solve problems and come up with the right answers. Students told inspectors that they learn about being independent by taking part in their off-site visits.
- You use additional funding effectively to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and those that need help to catch up. You have used this money to secure skilled and dedicated staff for your interventions team. You effectively support children and their families in areas such as communication, behaviour and a sleep programme. This work is highly valued by parents.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all pupils have sufficiently challenging learning tasks
- they continue to develop pupils' writing skills
- they further develop systems for assessing and tracking pupils' progress to ensure that they are consistent across the school
- they continue to develop support for children with autism spectrum disorder to enable them to become more independent learners.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Rotherham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Bernadette Moorcroft
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you and your senior and middle leaders, the CEO and deputy CEO of the Nexus Trust, three representatives from the governing body, 12 parents and two groups of pupils. Members of the team observed teaching, learning and assessment in lessons with senior leaders. We looked at the work in pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning. Inspectors considered the results from Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including 48 written responses from parents. We also considered responses to the staff questionnaire. Inspectors examined a range of documents, including information about safeguarding, the school's self-evaluation, the school development plan and information about pupils' progress.