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Mr Gregory Chiswell
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Dear Mr Chiswell

Short inspection of The Observatory School

Following my visit to the school on 14 March 2018 with Ofsted Inspector Nell Banfield, 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

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

Staff are highly dedicated to achieving the best for the pupils in their care, many of whom have had disruption to their education in the past. Pupils trust staff and relate well to them. The school's expectations are high. The pupils we spoke to said that the school helps them to learn and to improve their behaviour.

There have been many changes since the previous inspection. These included the introduction of an interim executive board (IEB) following significant concerns about governance in the past. In addition, you have been appointed as headteacher. Well over half of the teaching staff are new to the school. Throughout these changes, leaders have been careful to make sure that there has been the smallest possible disruption to pupils' learning. In addition, you have recently put in place a series of changes to the school buildings to ensure that the facilities best meet the needs of pupils. For example, the school has set up a classroom to provide a friendly environment for pupils in key stage 3 who have autism spectrum disorder or similar needs. Similarly, you have successfully established additional provision in school for pupils who find it hard to engage with the curriculum provided for most pupils. The local authority has asked the school to extend its provision to include older pupils in key stage 2. These extra pupils are due to start at the school in the week following this inspection. The school's re-established success gives confidence that the well-thought-out further development of the school will be successful.

The local authority, working with the IEB, has started the process of setting up a governing body, ready to take responsibility for the governance of the school in the long term. However, it is likely that the interim arrangements for governance will remain for the rest of this school year.

The members of staff we met, and who completed Ofsted's online survey, were very positive about the leadership of the school, its work and their contribution to the school. Staff morale is high, despite the changes and developments since the previous inspection.

At the previous inspection, inspectors asked the school to improve the rates of pupils' progress by teachers providing pupils with clearer information on how they were doing. The school has introduced a sharper assessment system which is used to identify the progress each pupil is expected to make. This is plotted, over time, as a 'flight path'. Teachers and leaders regularly discuss how well each pupil is achieving compared to their flight path and adjust them to a higher flight path when they are seen to be doing very well. In addition, teaching is carefully targeted to individual pupils' starting points, particularly in the additional provision offered to those with the greatest need. These arrangements help pupils to learn well. The teaching and learning we saw were most effective in art, mathematics and physical education.

The school was also asked to improve pupils' reading and writing skills. While the final outcomes for pupils in Year 11 in English lag behind those in mathematics, you ensure that the development of pupils' skills in English is given high priority. The school quickly implemented a whole-school literacy policy after the previous inspection. You measure pupils' reading ages and see very rapid increases in these for many pupils in their early stages at the school. This is because they are benefiting from more stable education and higher expectations about what they are expected to learn.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and members of the IEB have ensured that the arrangements for safeguarding pupils are very thorough. Staff receive the training required for them to know how to respond with confidence to any safeguarding concerns. The systems for reporting such concerns work well and allow for detailed follow-up by leaders. Leaders are persistent in demanding the support needed from outside agencies to protect pupils. If there are ever any difficulties with external partners providing a timely or sufficient response, school staff are prepared to take whatever steps are needed to make sure that pupils are as safe as possible. This is the case whether concerns arise within or outside the school day.

School leaders are fully aware of, and use, proper recruitment processes so that they can be confident that any member of staff they appoint is suitable to work with pupils. The school site is secure.

The pupils we spoke to feel safe in school. This is supported by their confidence in

talking to staff and the open conversations that this supports. Clear information about matters which could be a particular risk is displayed around the school for pupils to refer to.

Pupils' absence is above the national average. Leaders are fully aware that pupils who are absent may be at additional safeguarding risk. The school takes steps to ensure that pupils attend as well as possible. These range from immediate telephone calls to families when there is an absence for an unknown reason, to prosecutions. Attendance is improving.

Inspection findings

- The turbulence in leadership and governance since the previous inspection has been settled. Leadership is effective and senior leaders are very well supported by other members of staff. The IEB consists of two very experienced governors, both of whom are national leaders of governance. They provide clear challenge to school leaders and have not been afraid to take decisive action, when needed, to ensure that the school continues to be as good as possible. At the same time, they recognise that working with the pupils at the school can sometimes be very challenging and so are highly supportive of staff. The school is moving into a new phase of leadership as the process of transferring back to a governing body has just started. The IEB is also considering how to further strengthen leadership by appointing a substantive deputy headteacher.
- Teaching in some subjects, including art, mathematics and physical education, is highly effective. This helps pupils to make rapid progress. Where teaching is not as confident, progress can be slower. Leaders' checks on teaching mean that they can identify when any teachers would benefit from advice or training. This support is then provided. Teachers extend pupils' learning by developing their social and other skills in normal lessons and the wider opportunities offered. Leaders identify that some of the pupils' fastest learning happens when they are in challenging situations outside school. For example, the school uses sailing activities and visits to places as far afield as Iceland to help to develop pupils' social skills and confidence. Teachers and teaching assistants make sure that teaching is matched to pupils' starting points and needs. This helps pupils to make fast progress, as seen particularly in mathematics.
- While many pupils find it hard to behave well, the school has effective systems for supporting good behaviour. The school's rules and expectations are clear, and positive approaches are well modelled by staff. If any pupils behave less well, teachers' record-keeping of any incidents is thorough. This allows leaders to identify any patterns in pupils' behaviour and so target changes in how staff respond in the future. The number of exclusions from school fell about two years ago. This figure has now risen again. This reflects greater challenge to pupils about their behaviour, in line with the school's raised expectations, and the marked reduction in the use of alternative off-site provision for the most challenging pupils. Leaders took a decision to reduce alternative provision so that they could be sure that the education pupils were receiving was as effective as possible.

- Over time, pupils' attendance has been too low. This has meant that they have not been able to benefit fully from the education offered. In addition, pupils with particular vulnerabilities may have experienced greater risk of harm, for example from substance misuse or exploitation. Leaders' and IEB members' commitment to the welfare of pupils means that they have taken determined steps to raise attendance, which is improving. They challenge families when a pupil's attendance is poor. Some pupils show very large gains in attendance compared to their previous schools.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most effective teaching practice, as seen in art, mathematics and physical education, is consistently matched in all subjects so that pupils can make the fastest possible academic progress from their different starting points
- the established strategies to encourage good attendance continue to be rigorously applied so that pupils are able make the most of the opportunities offered by the school
- leadership structures, including governance, are further developed so that recent improvements to the school become even more firmly embedded and extended.

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

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors met with you and other senior leaders to discuss the school's effectiveness. Inspectors had discussions with the chair, the other member of the interim executive board and shadow governors, and with a representative of the local authority. An inspector had a telephone conversation with a consultant who is working with the school. Inspectors met with a group of pupils and saw others around the school during lessons and breaks. An inspector also met with a cross-section of staff. An inspector toured the school with you and an inspector observed the arrival and departure of pupils. Inspectors observed teaching and learning in classes across the school, mainly as joint activities with senior leaders. Inspectors scrutinised a sample of pupils' books and looked at other written work while talking to pupils in class. They examined documents, including information about the safeguarding of pupils, the school's self-evaluation document,

the improvement plan, minutes of meetings of the interim executive board and information about pupils' achievement. There were too few responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, for these to be considered. Inspectors reviewed 17 responses from members of staff to their online questionnaire.