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10 June 2016

Mr Adrian Carver
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Dear Mr Adrian Carver

Short inspection of Downs View Special School and Link College

Following my visit to the school on 17 May 2016 with John Bosley, 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 outstanding in June 2012.

This school and college continue to be outstanding.

Your unswerving commitment to forge continual improvement for the benefit of pupils and learners in your care is highly commendable. Your exemplary dedication and visionary approach has inspired staff and parents to be ambitious for each pupil and learner that attend the school and college. You, ably supported by all leaders, have created a strong culture of high expectations which has percolated throughout the school and college. You encourage innovative practice among your staff, which has facilitated continual forward momentum since the last inspection. As a result, your school and college go from strength to strength. The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school and college since the last inspection.

Pupils and learners with complex and diverse needs make outstanding progress, academically and socially, from their various starting points. There are striking examples where pupils and learners have made immense strides in their ability to communicate, to work alongside others and in regulating their own emotions and behaviours. This happens because you ensure that staff know and understand the needs of pupils and learners extremely well, and consequently staff are able to target next steps for learning precisely. Pupils and learners are acquiring skills that will help them to manage the next steps in their education and life beyond college.

You know the strengths of your school exceptionally well. However, you are humble in your accomplishments and therefore not complacent. You have driven

improvement and brought about further advancement since the last inspection. You and your staff have worked diligently to meet the recommendations made by inspectors at that time. Consequently, the positive contribution made by lead teachers is impressive. This is because they enthusiastically research and develop innovative practice to support and track the progress that pupils and learners make. For example, leaders profiled the engagement of pupils and learners with the most complex needs by observing them over a number of weeks. From this, they were able to provide teachers with valuable feedback about how best to support and engage pupils and learners in learning. As a result, pupils and learners made even greater progress in a wide variety of skills.

Admirably, you have generously shared your own expertise and that of your staff to affect the provision for pupils who have special educational needs or disability within Brighton. You are keen to continue to share what you have achieved at Downs View Special School and Link College in order to benefit the wider community.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, and in particular the deputy headteachers, have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are very effective, and records are detailed and of high quality. This is underpinned by the depth of knowledge staff have about all pupils and learners, who are nurtured and surrounded by care. Leaders work closely with other professionals to provide high-quality support for pupils and learners with complex and diverse needs.

Thorough checks are made on adults when they work or volunteer at the school. All staff have completed appropriate training according to their responsibilities. This includes training on safeguarding issues that reflect the most recent statutory guidance and legislation. It is noteworthy that the school's safeguarding policy is continually reviewed by leaders to make it relevant to the needs of pupils and learners. It is effectively implemented by all staff.

Equality of opportunity is central to the school's ethos. The school and college work closely with parents to ensure that pupils and learners participate in as many activities as possible.

Pupils and learners say that they feel safe and are taught how to keep themselves safe through learning how to express opinions, make choices and through self-advocacy. In addition, they are supported to understand road safety and 'stranger danger' while on trips that support the curriculum.

Inspection findings

- The quality of teaching is extremely effective. Learning is personalised to the specific needs of pupils and learners, and because of this, all pupils and learners are challenged, including those who are most able. Staff demonstrate high expectations and promote pupils' and learners' independence. They expect them to do as much as possible for themselves. Staff work as a cohesive team in each class to provide an enabling

curriculum. Central to this are strong relationships between staff that result in instinctive responses to the changing needs of pupils and learners within lessons and over time. One parent, whose child has attended the school and college for a total of 10 years, has summed up the views of many by stating, 'Throughout those ten years the standard of teaching has been incredibly and consistently high.'

- You are ambitious for all pupils and learners to make better than expected progress year on year. Assessment systems are used highly effectively to identify dips in progress. You are quick to identify how additional support can be put in place to prevent any pupil or learner from falling behind. Therefore, nearly all pupils make rapid progress from their various starting points. No pupils or learners make less than expected progress. Learners' portfolios show the outstanding progress they make in English, mathematics and science. Additionally, you have ensured that teachers' judgements on how well pupils and learners are doing are validated through external moderation.
- The needs of pupils entitled to support through pupil premium funding are extremely well met. The additional funding given by the government is allocated effectively to ensure that academic, emotional and social needs of pupils are provided for. The school targets the individual needs of pupils, and as a result, pupils make the same outstanding progress as other pupils in the school.
- Children's progress in early years is outstanding. Leaders work closely with parents, pre-school settings and other professionals to gain an accurate picture of children's ability on entry to the school to ensure that they build on what children can already do. They are quickly supported to understand what 'being at school' means and swiftly develop social skills that help them to learn. Leaders work closely with parents to agree targets for their children and to evaluate the progress children make from their starting points. Children's well-being is ensured because the environment is safe and, moreover, because staff know each child exceptionally well and effectively meet their complex needs. Children are prepared well for the next steps in their education and know how to behave, respond and be young learners.
- The sixth form, known as Link College, continues to be highly effective. Retention rates are exemplary and attendance is very high. Leaders ensure that assessment information from the school and other previous settings is used effectively to make sure that learning is accurately targeted to meet learners' needs and interests. In preparation for the future, the vast majority of the curriculum continues to focus on functional skills in mathematics, and literacy. Personal and social education is at the heart of the curriculum, and consequently learners develop good personal and social skills. Additionally, learners participate in work experience and in a mini profit-making enterprise. Learners in Year 12 and 13 run a weekly café which is open to parents and members of the public. Because of the exciting and varied opportunities the college provides, learners make exceptional progress in life skills that will help them in their transition beyond college.
- All learners access accreditation from the National Open College Network. They gain a qualification in either personal progress or independent living skills and functional skills. Most learners are able to access the Duke of Edinburgh Award and English Speaking Board, Award which culminates in a

presentation to other learners, participation in a group discussion and a formal phone conversation. Learning is carefully planned to prepare learners for their post-19 destinations. The multidisciplinary team help to secure effective transition to post-19 placements.

- The vast majority of parents speak highly about their children's experience at the Link College. One parent captured the views of many by expressing their thanks for the good progress their child is making because of the staff's understanding of their child's needs. They said, 'We have great communication with the college. The deputy headteacher and her team are very approachable. They are like an extended family.'
- Leaders have worked diligently to create an enriched programme of learning for pupils and learners, centred on the development of their communication and interaction skills. Learning is well planned to provide an interesting range of learning experiences. During this inspection key stage 2 pupils worked towards individual personal, social and health education targets in the 'soft room'. Here, pupils learned to regulate and manage their own senses and make good choices.
- Lead teachers and a senior teacher have recently designed a 'skills ladder', which works in harmony with individual education plan targets to define and assess pupils' and learners' core skill development within the curriculum. A central aim is to increase pupils' and learners' ability to do more on their own. This focus is already paying dividends. There is clear evidence that pupils and learners are making progress in important life skills, such as problem solving and working collaboratively. Leaders are enthused by the potential impact of the 'skills ladders' on pupils' and learners' future lives, and are keen to develop and embed this further.
- You are acutely aware of the need to work in close partnership with parents. To this end you facilitate regular activities, including parent counselling, coffee mornings and workshops, to capture parents' views and act upon them. There are many examples where your school staff have worked alongside families at home to support them in providing continuous provision between home and school. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the contribution and difference the school and college have made to their children's lives and, indeed, to their own. A parent wrote: 'The school works in an extremely collaborative way and they care about the child in every aspect of their life.'
- Lead teachers have worked in partnership with occupational health professionals to design a whole-class programme which enables pupils and learners to access the sensory regulation they need. It helps pupils to stay around the 'Just Right' zone in their feelings so that they are able to learn and play effectively. This innovative approach has enabled pupils and learners to make substantial progress in recognising their own responses to stimulus.
- Attendance is much better than the national average for special schools. Very few pupils have too many days off school. Younger pupils spoken to by inspectors stated how much they enjoy school, using the expression, 'I love it.' They were adamant that they would not change anything about their school. One parent shared their experience by saying, 'Both our children love going to school and cheer when the taxi arrives to take them.' Pupils keenly shared photographs showing the wide variety of activities they

experience at school. They were able to communicate what they were doing and why they enjoyed it.

- Leaders have ensured that British values are woven into the curriculum. For example, all staff help pupils and learners to develop their right to choose, express an opinion, to be part of a community and to be self-regulating. A parent wrote about their development by sharing that her child, 'now has an understanding of the world, the way it works and her place in it. Just remarkable.'
- The local authority monitors and evaluates the school's effectiveness and is confident in your ability to continually build on the school's outstanding provision. Your school has a marked impact on the community in which you serve. Training that staff deliver is highly regarded, particularly in helping local schools to develop an understanding of autistic spectrum conditions. You are influencing special educational need strategy by being a representative on various boards and working within the Deans Partnership, a local collaboration of schools. As a result, your outstanding school is a beacon of excellence that impacts on the lives of other pupils in the locality.
- The governing body shares your vision for the future of the school and college and makes a strong contribution to strategic leadership. Governors are an effective team that add to the capacity of the school and college to improve them further. Together, they are highly skilled and possess expertise that enables them to challenge leaders and offer valuable support. They are highly reflective and know the strengths and future areas for development exceptionally well. Currently, they are working with leaders to secure greater choice in provision for learners when they leave the college, especially for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. Governors undertake all their statutory duties conscientiously, including those relating to finance, safeguarding and the performance management of the headteacher.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- further embed the 'skills ladders' to measure and evaluate the school's work on developing pupils' and learners' life skills, so they are able to secure even better futures
- continue to explore ways to share expertise and influence practice for supporting pupils and learners who have special educational needs or disability in the wider community.

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

Yours sincerely

Abigail Birch
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, the deputy headteachers and other leaders, those responsible for safeguarding, including the school business manager, four members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. We visited all key stages across the school and college with the deputy headteachers. Inspectors spoke to pupils during lessons and breaktime, and met with them formally to gather their views. Inspectors looked at their work in a range of subjects alongside middle leaders. We took account of 29 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 19 written contributions by parents which were also made online. In addition, we took into account two written letters from parents, two verbal contributions made via the telephone to myself and one verbal contribution made directly to Ofsted. We spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day. We analysed a range of the school's documentation, including information about the achievement of pupils and learners, school policies and safeguarding procedures. We also discussed with you the evaluation of the school's effectiveness.