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Dear Mrs Mullan

Short inspection of The St Christopher School

Following my visit to the school on 8 June 2017 with Ofsted Inspector Liz Cornish, 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained and further improved the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your focused approach to making the school even better was apparent from the outset of the inspection. You are unwavering in your determination for all pupils to unlock their full potential and succeed. Leaders are excellent role models, with very high expectations. You, alongside the highly skilled senior leaders, inspire the whole school community to 'achieve more'. Staff morale is extremely high and they feel valued by the school's leadership. You have gained the respect, admiration and trust of the entire school community. Leaders and governors work tirelessly in developing all areas of the school and constantly check for new ways to make it even better.

The St Christopher School is an incredibly happy school. Pupils arrive cheerfully in the morning and are warmly welcomed by staff, who support them exceptionally well. Staff ensure that the learning environment is vibrant and welcoming. Pupils are extremely polite and well mannered. Inspectors observed very courteous, caring and friendly behaviour. You and your staff provide a nurturing learning environment, building pupils' confidence, self-esteem and independence over time.

Pupils are rightly proud of their school. This pride is reflected in the way pupils behave around the school. They are keen to talk about how teachers help them improve their work and motivate them in learning. They enjoy and participate in the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities that the school provides for them.

A vast majority of parents have a deep affection for the school. They are overwhelmingly positive about the high aspirations and support given by the school's leadership. Many responses on the free-text section of Ofsted's online survey mentioned their admiration for you, the increased happiness of their child since attending the school and 'staff going above and beyond' the call of duty in supporting families. Referring to the support provided, a parent said, 'It is amazing in every way.'

British values are taught across the school and celebrated through vibrant displays. Leaders recognise the importance of giving pupils experiences of varied cultures and visiting different places of worship such as the mosque, the synagogue and local churches. Bullying is not tolerated.

Under the guidance and expertise of the highly experienced chair of governors, the governing body carries out its statutory duties exceptionally well. Governors are extremely committed and dedicated to the work of the school. They have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, providing an excellent mix of the skills necessary to further support the school in its journey. They ensure that the pupil premium is used wisely to benefit all pupils. Governors visit the school regularly to see for themselves the difference leaders' actions are making.

A significant feature of the school's work is the high-quality outreach support provided to other local special and mainstream schools. This support is very well used and has a very positive impact on the quality of provision for pupils and staff across the local area.

Leaders have effectively addressed the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection. The 16 to 19 annexe was a new provision. This has helped leaders develop a more cohesive 16 to 19 offer on the school site. A variety of resources and activities are now used to promote effective independent learning in improved accommodation for older learners in the school. Leaders have responded successfully to sharing with each other some of the excellent ways they have found of marking pupils' books through the curriculum steering group. You have identified the need to further develop the skills and expertise of staff to enable a wider spread of leadership responsibilities.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is given a very high priority within the school. Systems for signing in visitors to the school are robust. The school's record of recruitment checks to ensure staff are suitable to work with children is compliant. Staff have received and read the latest guidance for 'Keeping children safe in education' (2016). Detailed and thorough records are kept of child protection concerns. When necessary, you work extremely effectively with external agencies to support your pupils' needs. Records regarding pupil attendance and behaviour are rigorously maintained and analysed to inform any required actions.

Pupils are taught to keep themselves safe in a number of ways. For example, they regularly learn about e-safety, road safety and how to stay safe in the local community. Pupils know that they can talk to staff about any problems or worries that they might have. Parents say they are very confident that their children are safe and extremely well cared for when they are at school. Safeguarding arrangements are equally strong for children who attend the early years setting and for students who attend post-16 provision.

Risk assessments are effective, including for when pupils go off-site on educational visits. Staff ensure that pupils are supervised at the beginning and end of the school day. Leaders check pupils' safety vigilantly as taxis arrive and leave the school site.

Inspection findings

- My first key line of enquiry in order to ascertain that the school remained outstanding focused on how effectively leaders keep in touch with parents and referring local authorities.
- Relationships with parents are extremely strong. Parents value the opportunity to use a variety of methods to communicate between home and school staff. For example, parents and staff make very regular use of your online journal. This captures pupils' experiences and celebrates individual pupils' progress and success. One parent stated, 'The way we are engaged to participate in their learning journey at every stage is by far above and beyond our expectations.' The sharing of information and regular contact with parents ensures that they contribute to the children's excellent progress.
- You also ensure you have very clear lines of communication with local authorities in order to provide the best education possible. Your own local authority regards the school as a beacon of excellence.
- My second key line of enquiry focused on how well leaders and managers ensure that communication skills in lessons develop at a suitable rate. All staff make consistently outstanding use of communication aids to ensure that pupils have full access to learning. This includes signing, symbols, gestures, body language and the use of information and communication technology to promote effective communication.
- Pupils show an exceptionally keen interest and are able to articulate what they are learning. During learning walks, we saw how well children readily engage in learning activities and were focused on their work. Teachers and learning support staff work seamlessly to support pupils in their communication. Speech and language therapists complement the team's work. Pupils typically sustain their attention and concentration to make rapid progress. Activities enhance communication in many ways: they support pupils' self-esteem, help them to grow in confidence and help pupils to voice an opinion. One parent said, 'Teachers are wonderful because their love for the children shines through in every aspect of their interaction with them.'
- My third line of enquiry focused on how leaders ensure that pupils are motivated to learn. Teachers plan highly stimulating lessons that draw out pupils'

understanding. You use the objectives in pupils' education, health and care plans (EHCPs) to plan finely tuned targets for their learning and personal development. You have ensured that tasks set for pupils consistently take account of their starting points, and that teachers provide opportunities for the most able pupils to extend their knowledge. You have ensured that teachers monitor pupils' progress accurately and, as a result, any gaps pupils have in their knowledge are closed swiftly and effectively. Work seen shows that teachers set appropriate tasks to meet the needs of pupils consistently. For example, the most able pupils respond successfully to 'think' questions for additional opportunities to develop their reasoning skills.

- Relationships are extremely positive between adults and pupils. Pupils really enjoy learning and are developing into resilient, lifelong learners. Mini-enterprise skills are developed, but you acknowledge that further work can be done by raising the profile more with the creation of a business and enterprise centre.
- My fourth line of enquiry focused on how leaders have extended and improved the provision for the growing number of sixth form students. Due to the high success and, therefore, increasing reputation of the sixth form, the number of students transferring from local mainstream and special schools is growing quickly.
- The range of accreditation opportunities and the curriculum offer for sixth form students has developed significantly. Leaders have designed a bespoke curriculum that meets the wide range of special educational needs and abilities of students. The vast majority of students make rapid progress in a wide range of subjects.
- Staff are very knowledgeable and highly creative in their approach. They craft learning so that it engages all students, whatever their starting points. All staff ask probing questions that deepen students' learning through active participation. Students' responses show the extent of their enthusiasm for learning.
- My fifth line of enquiry focused on the welfare arrangements of the youngest children in the early years. Staff work very closely with families to provide strong support to help them manage their child's transition into the school. Children are happy and learn exceedingly well in this caring, well-organised and stimulating environment. They swiftly settle into the routines and respond appropriately to adults' very high expectations. Adults are trained well and skilfully use every opportunity to encourage and develop children's speaking and language skills.
- You have provided children with their own outdoor learning environment and ensure that they have separate breaktimes that are well supervised. There is a very strong emphasis on keeping safe and how to stay safe for the younger children.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they maintain and further develop the skills and expertise of staff to enable a wider spread of leadership capabilities

- they further extend the business and enterprise curriculum opportunities through their planned creation of a business and enterprise centre.

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

Yours sincerely

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we checked safeguarding arrangements, including the records of recruitment checks, policies and procedures. We reviewed a range of published information, including the school's website, and reviewed the school's self-evaluation and development plan. We reviewed records of behaviour and attendance. We also spoke to teachers and learning support assistants wherever this did not interrupt pupils' learning. We undertook these visits with senior leaders. We considered 61 responses to the Parent View online questionnaire, 23 responses to the pupil survey, 28 responses to the staff survey, 59 text responses and a letter from a parent. One inspector also spoke to parents at the start and at the end of the school day and made calls to parents. We spoke to the chair of governors and a local authority representative by telephone and met with the safeguarding governor and senior leaders.