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Dear Ms Lowe

Short inspection of Sydenham School

Following my visit to the school on 14 March 2017 with Ofsted Inspector James Whiting, 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. You have provided sharp focus and additional drive to secure further improvements in the school's performance since being appointed as headteacher in September 2016. Your evaluation of the school's performance since the last inspection is accurate and well informed by leaders' scrutiny of the work done to address the areas identified for improvement. This has reduced variation between subjects and raised pupils' attainment and progress so that last year's GCSE results were the best that the school has achieved. Pupils' progress overall was significantly better than average in 2016. The progress of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was in line with their peers nationally. Your plans for development are well focused upon further reducing the in-school variation in the performance of disadvantaged pupils and their peers, resulting in particularly strong gains currently in Years 7, 8 and 9.

A significant focus of leaders' work has also been upon improving attendance and reducing persistent absence, particularly of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Pupils' attendance overall has improved since the last inspection so that it is now slightly better than average and continuing to improve. You have raised the bar of expectation for pupils' attendance, punctuality and behaviour. Pupils respect the changes you have introduced and think that they have made a difference to their enjoyment of school. Your holistic approach to improving pupils' attendance by raising their ambition and attitudes to school is paying off. However, some pupils' attendance remains too low. You and your team have worked hard to improve the attendance of pupils from

harder-to-reach families and have seen some significant improvements in attendance of individual pupils. But persistent absence, particularly of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, remains higher than that of their peers.

Pupils, parents and governors rightly praise the work that you have done to raise standards since being appointed as headteacher. You have demanded further refinement and sharper focus upon all aspects of the school's performance so that pupils experience the best possible education at Sydenham School. You recognise that some new procedures and strategies are yet to fully embed and result in the improvements anticipated in disadvantaged pupils' performance. Governors are challenging of leaders' work and hold you stringently to account in most respects. However, the governing body was less challenging in the past about the use of catch-up funding and specific pupil premium funded strategies. This has recently been addressed and governors are now more demanding.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have cultivated an effective school-wide understanding of safeguarding that they refer to as the 'golden thread'. This guides their work so that the school community's understanding of potential risks is robust and accurate, informing staff's daily work to safeguard pupils' welfare. The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a high quality. The culture of safeguarding in the school is grounded in well thought through policies and procedures that protect pupils from harm, anticipate risks and respond appropriately. Staff are knowledgeable about how to spot signs of neglect and possible harm, and have received training that they put to effective use when required. Leaders and governors have ensured that they fulfil the 'Prevent' duty effectively. Staff are well aware of the potential safeguarding risks associated with pupils' absence from school. The school's focus upon supporting pupils' emotional and mental health is strong; an example of how leaders recognise emerging risks and respond quickly.

Pupils' understanding of how to keep themselves safe is secure, reporting to inspectors that they know who the 'go to' people are should they have any concerns. Parents and staff consider this to be a safe school, a view shared by pupils and agreed by inspectors.

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of this inspection, it was agreed with the senior leadership team to focus upon three key lines of enquiry, which you believed well matched leaders' own areas of focus for improvement. We started by focusing upon how leaders are diminishing the difference in performance between disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and their peers, particularly those with average starting points.

- Leaders have prioritised this in their plans. They have introduced effective systems to develop teachers' skills, particularly in planning activities that stretch pupils and through effective questioning. Teaching and learning are well focused upon most pupils' needs. For pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, this is particularly effective, partly because the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) plays an integral role in quality assuring the education that pupils with additional needs receive.
- The school has raised teachers' and pupils' expectations of what pupils can achieve. The whole-school focus upon stretching the most able pupils has been effective and has resulted in teachers planning lessons that challenge pupils to progress well from their starting points.
- Governors challenge leaders to check that pupils are making the progress that they are capable of. However, only recently have they refined their scrutiny of how the pupil premium is used to raise disadvantaged pupils' progress to match that of their peers.
- A number of intervention strategies are in place to support disadvantaged pupils' progress outside lessons, resulting in these pupils making average progress last year at GCSE. Inspectors found that there is little difference in the standard of work and progress being made by disadvantaged pupils, but there remains a difference between their progress and that of other pupils, particularly in Year 11. Recently introduced strategies have not yet embedded in teachers' practice to improve pupils' performance consistently across subjects and year groups.
- Second, we focused upon the school's work to improve pupils' attendance and to reduce persistent absence, particularly of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. A significant amount of work has been done to improve attendance, including new staffing structures and improved procedures. This is a reflection of leaders' accurate identification of the link between those groups' progress and their attendance. As a result of the work done, attendance overall, and for groups of pupils, has improved over the last three years.
- Some groups of pupils' attendance continues to be poorer. Strategies put in place have significantly improved a number of pupils' attendance who form a core group of weaker attenders. But a disproportionately high number of those remaining in that group come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders recognise that further work is needed to engage with the families of those pupils and are exploring further strategies to improve the situation.
- Finally, we explored how leaders are ensuring that variation between subjects' performance is minimised and results in pupils accessing suitable and highly aspirational destinations after Year 11 and the sixth form.
- Leaders have worked well to ensure greater consistency in pupils' performance across subjects at GCSE and in 16 to 19 study programmes. Formerly weaker subjects, such as geography and mathematics, are now performing better.

Subjects such as science at GCSE and psychology at A level are receiving effective support that draws upon the successful strategies used in the past.

- Leaders recognise that reducing variability in pupils' achievements across the curriculum also depends upon pupils' literacy and numeracy skills being well supported in all subjects. Strategies to support pupils' skills are effective. The school demonstrates a culture where pupils read for fun and increasingly use their literacy skills well across subjects, particularly in humanities. Better planned support to help pupils improve their literacy and numeracy and to enable them to catch up with their peers is now embedding. The catch-up funding is being used well to help pupils develop their literacy and numeracy skills quicker.
- Since the last inspection, the proportion of pupils staying on to study 16 to 19 study programmes at the combined Sydenham Forest Hill Sixth Form has increased and students continue to make good progress. All students last year moved on to appropriate university courses, apprenticeships and other training. This is a consequence of study programmes being well matched to their needs, greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning across subjects, and effective careers advice and guidance.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils' attendance improves further and persistent absence falls, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
- recently introduced teaching and learning strategies embed quickly, are robustly scrutinised and further diminish the difference between disadvantaged pupils' performance and their peers.

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

Yours sincerely

Matt Tiplin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors:

- held meetings with leaders, staff, governors and the local authority, and with pupils. Inspectors also held informal discussions with pupils
- listened to pupils in receipt of additional catch-up support reading
- visited lessons jointly with members of the senior leadership team to observe learning and scrutinise pupils' work
- observed pupils' behaviour during lunchtime and toured the school with the headteacher
- scrutinised documentation, including: the school's arrangements for safeguarding, including the single central record of pre-employment checks; attendance, behaviour and assessment information; policies and procedures, including those for managing attendance, assessment and teachers' professional development; minutes of governing body meetings; external reviews of the school
- considered the views of 75 parents and 64 staff who responded to Ofsted's surveys.