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Mr Paul Yeomans
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Dear Mr Yeomans

Short inspection of Riversides School

Following my visit to the school on 13 December 2016 with Peter Humphries HMI, 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 July 2013.

As you know, in January 2014, the school became a sponsor-led academy and joined one of four special schools run by Advance Trust, a multi-academy trust (MAT). The MAT appointed an executive principal to have oversight of all four of its special schools. Your senior leadership team comprises two assistant headteachers, who each manage one of two sites, a lead practitioner and senior learning mentors. The Thorneloe site accommodates pupils in Years 3 to 8 and the Riversides Senior School site caters for pupils in Years 9 to 11. Some pupils attend alternative provision off site, which is supervised and well managed by senior staff from Riversides. All pupils have an education, health and care plan or statement of special educational needs for social, mental and emotional health conditions. A small number of pupils have autism spectrum disorder.

This school continues to be good.

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

Leaders, staff and governors are very committed to the core principles you introduced to the school, 'Dare2Dream'. These principles include a very strong commitment to pupils' personal development, welfare, achievement and behaviour. Despite many staff and leadership changes since the previous inspection, you and the staff have maintained good teaching and continue to build strong and warm relationships with pupils, families and carers. Pupils enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in improving attendance rates and a significant reduction in persistent

absence. Sustained improvement to pupils' achievement also reflects that improved attendance has a positive effect on pupils' learning and progress.

Pupils' achievement and their behaviour continue to be good because of effective teaching by all staff and the care and skilled interventions provided by teaching assistants and learning mentors. There have been significant improvements to the curriculum since the previous inspection. Leaders and staff provide a broad range of activities that are well suited to pupils' social, mental and emotional needs. It is encouraging to see that the majority of pupils are on track to achieve their learning targets and are making good progress. Pupils achieve consistently well in mathematics in key stages 2 to 4, but some pupils, particularly in key stage 2, make slower progress in reading and writing. There is now scope to use assessment information more accurately to identify pupils who are capable of reaching age-related standards.

There is a strong commitment to helping pupils acquire the skills necessary to prepare them for the next stage of their education, training or employment. This is clearly evident in the range of experiences planned for pupils, which includes outdoor adventurous activities to improve their self-confidence and social skills. Cooking classes enable pupils to organise themselves, work as a team and learn skills that prepare them well for the future. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme is very successful as every pupil across the school completes and achieves one of many grades of award. Work experience and preparation for apprenticeships on farms or courses at local colleges result in nearly all pupils leaving key stage 4 going on to further education, training, employment or apprenticeships.

The staff encourage pupils to play an active role in society. One member of the 'pupils' parliament' summed it up by telling me, 'We make decisions for the school'. You and your staff are very good at listening to pupils' views and allowing them to contribute to their community by organising charity events and deciding how the proceeds are spent to support others in and beyond the immediate locality.

Pupils who have autism spectrum disorder achieve well, although, like other pupils, some lack confidence and the language and communication skills to articulate fluently. Leaders and staff use pictorial prompts and visual resources to develop pupils' language and communication skills. However, visual resources are not always accessible in classrooms or displayed prominently enough to hold pupils' attention for sustained periods. This is particularly the case in classrooms and corridors on the Thorneloe site. There are some good examples of pupils' work, including science, number work and writing, displayed in some classrooms. However, the best examples of pupils' work are not displayed or accessible enough to other pupils. As a result, pupils do not get to see enough good work as models of best practice to aim for and achieve.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding and staff vetting procedures are thorough and fit for purpose. Staff are vigilant and maintain an effective culture of safeguarding. Governors and staff keep up to date with training and carry out robust risk assessments of all on-site and off-site activities and resources. The morning and after-school arrangements for transporting pupils to and from school by taxi are safe and well organised. There are effective arrangements in place to check whether pupils are safe when attending alternative off-site activities or provision. Home visits are carried out by staff to keep in touch with families and carers. Leaders and administrators carry out same-day telephone calling and/or texting to contact parents and carers when pupils are absent from school, ensuring that leaders know that pupils are being looked after by a responsible adult and that they are safe. Leaders regularly contact parents and carers sensitively when consulting them to make sure that the school is fully informed and up to date with any changes to pupils' health or emotional needs. The safeguarding, health and safety governor also brings significant expertise to the school. Together with senior leaders, governors monitor risk assessments and health and safety procedures effectively.

Inspection findings

- There are very positive and trusting relationships between staff, leaders and pupils. As one member of the 'pupil parliament' stated, 'the staff always have our best interests at heart,' and another pupil said, 'the staff are great and I love coming to school because they really care about us'. Pupils are correct; the staff teams on both sites are devoted and committed to providing the very best for all pupils. Attendance rates are improving and persistent absence is reducing, reflecting how much pupils enjoy coming to school.
- Another reason why pupils enjoy school is because you and the leadership team have extended the curriculum and changed the timetable to provide pupils with shorter, more focused sessions. This helps, in particular, those pupils who have social and mental health conditions that prevent them from concentrating for longer periods of time.
- You have successfully combined the house system with a rewards and sanctions behaviour policy. This is proving very effective as pupils are helped to modify their behaviour, even when feeling anxious or distressed. The teaching assistants and learning mentors play a significant and important role in the successful implementation of the school's behaviour management system. Staff are very well trained and effective. Records show that incidents de-escalate quickly and pupils are kept safe at all times, with very little physical restraint used if pupils become angry or upset.
- Assessment information shows that the teaching continues to be effective in helping pupils to achieve well by the end of key stage 4. More pupils than previously are now working towards recognisable and credible qualifications, with some on track to achieve higher GCSE grades than last year.

- Governance is effective. Governors bring significant skills and experience to help leaders and staff sustain improvements to the school. Senior leaders and governors monitor teaching and learning effectively. The governing body provides a good balance of challenge and support to hold leaders and staff to account for pupils' achievements and staff performance.
- Senior leaders, governors and staff have made significant improvements to the curriculum since the previous inspection in 2013. This is successful as pupils concentrate and persevere more with their work, and teachers provide more varied and interesting practical activities for pupils to engage in. Pupils in Years 7 and 8, for example, were observed investigating a mock crime scene using evidence stored on a computer database. The pupils skilfully investigated the evidence using their information and communication technology skills and spreadsheets to narrow down the 'suspect'.
- The staff provide a rich variety of lessons, subjects, topics and extra-curricular activities and visits that also reflect core British values of respect, tolerance and understanding of different faiths, cultures and customs. For example, as part of the Remembrance Day commemorations, pupils were taken to France to visit some of the D-Day landing sites.
- Evidence from pupils' books and learning profiles shows that leaders and staff have focused successfully on improving pupils' mathematical skills, including functional numeracy and practical work using computers. This is an improvement since the previous inspection.
- Pupils in Years 3 to 8 form their letters reasonably accurately when writing independently. However, pupils' handwriting is uneven and some make repeated spelling errors, so more is needed to achieve consistency when pupils write independently.
- Literacy is promoted well when pupils are told traditional or modern stories; when authors or storytellers visit; and when pupils read scripts to perform a play. Again, these are significant improvements to teaching and the curriculum since the previous inspection. However, many pupils do not choose to read independently enough or experience a wide enough range of reading activities for sustained periods of time.
- Leaders are, rightly, re-focusing their efforts on making available books that will be of particular interest to pupils, such as adventure stories or the work of particular children's authors, with the aim of increasing the number of pupils reaching age-related standards in literacy.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers and leaders use assessment information to track the progress of pupils capable of reaching age-related standards in reading and writing to help all of these pupils reach these standards

- there is a continued focus on improving pupils' language and communication skills, particularly for pupils who have autism spectrum disorder and those who have social and emotional difficulties
- staff provide a more visually stimulating learning environment at the Thorneloe site, including examples of good work displayed for pupils to aspire towards achieving.

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

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, the executive principal of the multi-academy trust and the two assistant headteachers. I held a meeting with four governors, including the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. Inspectors carried out joint observations of lessons on both of the school's sites together with you or the assistant headteachers. During lessons and at other times, inspectors looked at pupils' work in books, and records of their attainment and progress. My colleague and I spoke to pupils during lessons and breaktimes. We also observed them arriving at school in the morning, some arriving on foot and most coming to school in taxis, each with their assigned adult passenger assistant to help them. I met with seven members of the 'pupil parliament', including the 'prime minister' and 'deputy prime minister'. I considered the views of parents and carers who responded to school surveys. There were too few parent responses to review from the online Ofsted questionnaire, Parent View. I also considered the views of 18 members of staff who responded to the Ofsted staff questionnaire. Inspectors scrutinised and discussed with you and the senior leadership team the school's self-evaluation and development plan. I checked staff vetting and safeguarding procedures to determine whether the school's safeguarding arrangements are effective. My colleague and I checked the way leaders and staff carry out risk assessments to ensure that pupils are safe when attending off-site or alternative provision.

During this short inspection, I tested four main lines of enquiry:

- the extent to which some pupils' irregular attendance affects their learning and progress
- the quality of teaching and how well teachers plan work for pupils that offers the right level of challenge

- the extent to which the school's planned curriculum prepares pupils for the next stage of their lives, as well as their education, training or employment.
- the safety and well-being of pupils, as well as determining the effectiveness of leaders' risk assessments and safeguarding procedures.