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Mrs Melissa Bradshaw
Headteacher
Heart of the Forest Community Special School
Speech House
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Dear Mrs Bradshaw

Short inspection of Heart of the Forest Community Special School

Following my visit to the school on 30 January 2018 with Hester Millsop, 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 good in September 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Pupils are making at least good progress, from the youngest children to the oldest student. They enjoy coming to school, learning and developing their understanding of the world throughout the school day.

Pupils and their families are proud to be part of the Heart of the Forest learning community. Developing pupils' independence and life-preparing learning skills are at the core of what this school does. All pupils have access to the full national curriculum as well as other exciting life-enhancing activities. They learn about the world of work, how to shop for themselves and to make choices. Pupils learn how to say no!

The school buildings and outside areas provide stimulating and attractive learning opportunities. Great care and thought is taken to provide pupils with a wide range of equipment and good-quality resources with which to learn and play.

Pupils have access to independent careers advice and there are strong relationships between the school and local college that enable older pupils to transfer their education to the college if they are able.

The points for improvement raised from the previous inspection have been met effectively. The curriculum fully covers the range of different cultures and lifestyles in the United Kingdom and further afield. In addition, provision for sex and relationships education is carefully planned for each pupil. Parents and carers also

appreciate the adolescent sex and relationship support provided for them to help their children.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff, and those responsible for governance, ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Strong relationships with other agencies and organisations ensure that pupils are kept safe at home and in school. Safer-recruitment procedures are carefully followed. All staff have regular, high-quality training that keeps them up to date. Staff know what to do and where to go if they have any concerns.

Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe. Parents are also supported well by the school to help protect their children. Leaders and the governing body keep a coordinated eye to ensure that pupils are kept safe and secure, for example by adapting the school buildings and external site to keep out the local wild boars.

The appointment of the school nurse is having a positive impact. Pupils can now attend medical clinic appointments on site with the school nurse attending alongside. She provides good support for families and enhances the communication between the medical professionals and families. This has reduced anxiety and increased attendance in school and at medical clinics.

Inspection findings

- First, we evaluated how well pupils' communication skills are being developed. We found that staff use a wide variety of different ways to help pupils share their views and opinions and make choices. As you note, 'communication sits with the child and not the classroom'. You ensure that pupils, including those with the most complex needs, are 'listened' to. For example, staff pay very close attention to pupils' expressions and breathing to help identify what they need or desire. Parents were effusive in their praise for the way that staff understand their children and the excellent ways in which they care for and support them. We agreed that some pupils, notably the most able in the school, need to have better letter formation to make their written work more legible. We noted that the handwriting of some staff needs to be clearer to enable pupils to have good models from which to copy and learn.
- Good progress is being made to raise staff confidence in signing. You have provided training and support for staff to physically sign with their hands during the school day. You have been monitoring the impact of this work and have included a signing club to encourage pupils to sign and have staff signing champions to lead and support other staff. You are aware that staff are signing more often but know that the clarity and amount of signing could be further enhanced. You have identified this in the school's action plan.
- Next, we looked at how well the middle leaders in school were measuring pupils' achievements through the school's assessment systems. The school uses a wide range of systems to cover the different aspects of the curriculum. For example, switch use, movement and music, and outdoor adventure activities, as well as

the subjects of the national curriculum. Staff, including middle leaders, understand the different systems and apply them well. Middle leaders have identified pupils who have not made the progress expected of them. Middle leaders have not yet fully understood why or observed these pupils in lessons. This is part of your action plan to develop the expertise and knowledge of the middle leaders as well as improving pupils' outcomes.

- The inspection's third line of enquiry was to check that the courses and learning experiences that pupils have are age-appropriate, meeting their needs and desires. The curriculum throughout the school builds on pupils' previous knowledge and understanding. It is rich and varied. It is highly tailored to meet individual pupils' needs. It prepares pupils well for the next steps in their education and for life after school by applying what they have learned in lessons in the community. For example, understanding they cannot buy chocolate biscuits with the money they have because they need to buy apples for their food technology lesson.
- All pupils, no matter how complex their needs, have work-based opportunities. Pupils who need to use an eye tracker can use it to record the orders that customers make in the café. On occasions, you have found it hard to find work experience locally that fully meets pupils' desires. This is an area that you are continuing to improve.
- Finally, we examined how well the governing body holds leaders and managers to account. They are a strong group. They are highly involved in all aspects of the work of the school, leading strategically with you. They work closely with you to ensure that aspirations for pupils remain high. With you, they enable staff to learn from best practice, follow recommendations such as from the Rochford Review and lead new initiatives. For example, staff conduct action research in the school to measure and develop the multi-disciplinary work carried out by specialists and school staff. They have ensured that the extra sports funding is used highly effectively.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils who can write improve their letter formation
- the quality of middle leadership is further developed as designed in the school's action plan
- communication is further improved by staff signing with their hands more frequently and clearly throughout the school day.

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

Yours sincerely

Steffi Penny
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We agreed the timetable and activities for the day. We worked with you and other senior leaders during the day. We met with other leaders and members of the governing body. We spoke with groups of pupils, students and parents. We examined the quality of pupils' work and observed pupils learning in lessons and when at play.

We considered a wide range of documentary evidence, including records relating to safeguarding, the quality of teaching, the curriculum, assessment information, the school's self-evaluation and action plans. We reviewed the procedures you use to keep pupils safe.

Inspectors took account of the 19 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 17 text responses. The inspectors considered the 34 responses from staff and the 24 responses from pupils and students to the Ofsted electronic survey.