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Mrs Jane Eccleston
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Eccleston

Short inspection of The Acorns School

Following my visit to the school on 21 February 2017 with Bernard Robinson, 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 January 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 taken the school from strength to strength. You set high standards for both staff and pupils. No one is in any doubt of your high expectations and aspirations. You have made some key appointments, including the deputy headteacher and special educational needs coordinator, to help you achieve your ambitious plans. Staff are proud to work at the school and share your vision to make The Acorns the best school it can be.

Your fellow headteachers and the local authority hold your school in high regard. They applaud the positive difference you make to the pupils they refer to you. The headteachers and local authority officers told inspectors that, for many of the pupils, The Acorns was the 'last hope'. Many of your pupils have struggled to cope in their mainstream schools. Most pupils have attended several schools and missed significant periods of their education due to exclusions, prior to starting at The Acorns. However, for most pupils, coming to your school is a turning point in their lives. Year 11 pupils who spoke to me talked enthusiastically about their plans for when they leave and Year 9 pupils are keen to return to their mainstream schools.

Despite almost all of your pupils having demonstrated challenging behaviour in their mainstream schools, your school is calm and orderly. Pupils settle quickly to their work in lessons, listen attentively to their teachers and take pride in their work.

They are polite to staff, visitors and each other. Pupils respect the firm and consistent boundaries that you and your staff have put in place. Your pupils look smart in their uniforms. Pupils are motivated by the rewards system you have put in place.

At the previous inspection, the inspector asked you to accelerate pupils' progress in English and mathematics. You have refined the assessments you carry out when pupils start at your school so that you quickly identify any gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills. The personalised programmes you put in place for each pupil are a strength. Moreover, you make sure that you regularly review pupils' progress so that you can amend the programmes if required. You have made sure that more pupils are entered for GCSE examinations in Year 11 and that the proportion of pupils achieving the higher grades has increased. Year 11 pupils talked enthusiastically to me about the useful feedback they received from their teachers following their recent mock examinations. You keep a close eye on the quality of provision offered by alternative providers. You have made sure that where their provision falls short of the high standards you expect, you terminate the agreement. The investment in training for subject leaders is paying dividends. Subject leaders value their regular meetings with colleagues from local schools, which help them to refine and improve their practice. You have now appointed a member of staff to lead on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum so that you can raise standards even higher.

The deputy headteacher has successfully developed an effective academic assessment and tracking system, which is also helping you to raise standards across the school. You have, quite rightly, recognised the importance of more systematically assessing and tracking other aspects of pupils' performance, such as social and emotional skills, which are key to pupils' success. Moreover, you are grappling with the challenge of measuring pupils' progress, including in attendance, from their different starting points. You recognise that this will help you to set sharper performance targets.

At the previous inspection, the inspector also identified the need to strengthen leadership and management in preparation for your school having full responsibility for its own budget. Governors and leaders made sure that they attended training to help them understand how to manage the school's budget. Despite the financial challenges leaders have faced, you have made sure that you have embraced this change. You have made good use of the opportunities financial independence has offered, for example restructuring the leadership team to better meet the school's priorities. You have made the referral process more efficient so that mainstream schools provide information about pupils' academic progress prior to the pupils' admission meetings. You have refined and improved your reviews of teaching and learning. You now use the teachers' standards to help you evaluate teachers' strengths and areas for development. You have made sure that staff have more opportunities to review pupils' work with their colleagues. This approach is helping to disseminate good practice across the school and improve consistency between subjects. Staff agree that performance management targets set are challenging but appreciate the support they receive to help them achieve these targets.

Safeguarding is effective.

A culture of vigilance permeates the school. You carry out thorough checks to make sure that new staff are suitable to work with children. Staff undertake regular training to make sure that they understand their responsibilities. The school's record-keeping is scrupulous. Staff make sure that they report any concerns and these are followed up meticulously. The designated safeguarding lead has developed strong partnerships with other agencies. Pupils feel safe and well cared for. Pupils are confident that the very rare incidents of bullying are quickly nipped in the bud by staff. Pupils appreciate the support the school gives them and their families. The curriculum provides a wealth of opportunities for pupils to learn about the different risks they may face and how to deal with them.

Inspection findings

- You have an accurate view of the school. You know its strengths and areas for improvement. Your staff understand the school's priorities and are keen to play their part in your improvement plans.
- You have prioritised improving pupils' attendance. Many pupils had very poor attendance records at their previous schools. You have set up robust systems, enabling you to follow up absences promptly. While you offer support to parents and carers who struggle to make sure their children come to school, you do not shy away from taking decisive action, including legal proceedings, when all other strategies have failed. As a result, for almost all groups of pupils attendance has improved considerably.
- You recognise the importance of working in partnership with parents. Inspectors spoke to parents who talked very positively about the frequent telephone calls and review meetings held to let them know how their children are getting on. Staff were delighted by the high proportion of parents who attended the recent Year 11 review meetings.
- Governors have stepped up to the mark. They have made sure that they have the skills, knowledge and experience needed. Governors make good use of their frequent visits to school as well as the comprehensive information they ask you to provide to gain a wide-ranging understanding of the school. While you have their full support, they do not shy away from asking challenging questions and putting forward their own suggestions for improvements.
- Since the previous inspection, you have broadened the range of subjects you offer. You have appointed subject-specialist teachers. You offer qualifications at a wider range of levels to meet the diverse needs of your pupils. These improvements are benefiting your most able pupils in particular. They are now able to gain the qualifications they need to secure places on A-level courses.
- Despite the very challenging behaviour pupils have exhibited in their mainstream schools, there have been no permanent exclusions at your school since the previous inspection. There have been a very small number of fixed-term exclusions each year. Staff are expert at dealing with any incidents. The excellent

relationships staff develop with pupils mean that they are able to resolve any issues quickly and calmly. On the very rare occasions that staff use physical intervention, pupils are adamant that staff always follow procedure. You make sure that all serious incidents are assiduously followed up and record-keeping is meticulous. You make sure that staff who use physical intervention are well trained.

- Your staff provide high levels of support to pupils to help them to be successful in school. However, currently there are not enough opportunities for pupils to take more responsibility for their learning and behaviour. This is particularly important as they prepare to move on to post-16 provision or back into mainstream school.
- Your comprehensive assessment on entry helps you identify any specific difficulties. You make sure that your personalised programmes help disadvantaged pupils, Year 7 pupils who did not reach the expected standard in reading and mathematics and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, to overcome their barriers to learning. Parents of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are effusive in their praise for the support you give their children. The local authority officer responsible for children looked after speaks highly of the effective way in which you deploy the additional monies for these pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- provide pupils with more opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour in preparation for returning to their mainstream school or moving on to education, employment or training
- further develop the school's approach to assessment and tracking to measure pupils' progress from their different starting points on entry, across the range of performance indicators: academic, social, emotional and behavioural.

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

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection we met with you, senior teachers, teaching and support staff. An inspector met two members of the governing body, including the chair. We also spoke with representatives of the local authority, local secondary schools and

alternative providers. No parents responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, so inspectors considered the school's own recent survey of parents as well as speaking to some parents by telephone and in person. An inspector met formally with a group of staff and considered the 23 responses to Ofsted's online survey of staff. Inspectors spoke formally to two groups of pupils as well as informally to pupils both in lessons and at breaktimes. Inspectors also considered the 11 pupil responses to Ofsted's online survey. We visited classrooms to observe pupils' learning. We made visits to classrooms with senior leaders. We looked at information about pupils' progress and attainment and the school's self-evaluation and action plans. We conducted a full review of safeguarding, including an evaluation of the school's procedures and policies to keep pupils safe, training records, recruitment checks and record-keeping.