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Ms Julie-Ann Davies
Headteacher
Hillcrest School
Stonehouse Lane
Birmingham
West Midlands
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Dear Ms Davies

Short inspection of Hillcrest School, A Specialist Maths and Computing College and Sixth Form Centre

Following my visit to the school on 12 July 2017 with Alison Naylor, 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 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 established clear expectations for staff and pupils, making some necessary staffing changes along the way, and your strong ambition for improving outcomes for all pupils has led to good examination results.

You responded well to the findings of the last full inspection, and to a more recent subject inspection of mathematics, and have taken appropriate action to tackle the weaknesses in the school. In a few instances, a small number of pupils have not done as well as they might, but you have intervened quickly and brought about improvement where this was needed.

A notable characteristic of your school is the harmonious relationship between pupils and staff from different backgrounds and cultures. Many more pupils join the school midway through a school year than is the case usually, often from overseas, and you are adept at integrating them into a cohesive school community. Parents, staff and pupils all commented on the caring and supportive ethos of your school. Staff commented that they were very proud of the way in which pupils from so many different cultural and religious backgrounds respect and support each other.

You are aware of the next steps required to improve the school further, including by ensuring that all teaching reflects the best practice that exists in the school, and your action plans reflect this.

Safeguarding is effective.

Overall, a strong culture of effective care and support for pupils pervades your school and, within this, safeguarding is given particular importance. You and your staff respond well to the welfare needs of pupils from different backgrounds and are tenacious in ensuring that they are kept safe, including by challenging other agencies. Leaders hold regular safeguarding briefings and provide detailed training which all staff attend. This programme ensures that staff are well informed about the risks that vulnerable pupils may face. The pupils we spoke with said that they feel safe and they understand whom to speak to if they have any concerns.

Pupils' conduct is excellent. Around the school and in lessons, pupils are courteous and confident. Attendance is good, and any absence from school is followed up quickly and thoroughly. The school works well together as a community, and bullying of any kind is rare and dealt with swiftly. Pupils are aware of the different risks that may face them in today's society and they are helped to keep themselves safe.

Inspection findings

- A very large proportion of pupils join the school midway through the academic year and these pupils are supported skilfully from the outset. They make good progress from their different starting points.
- Most pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported well and make reasonable progress. The number of these pupils is growing and staff absence has meant that a few pupils have not received early and specific help in the classroom. However, leaders have introduced new and robust procedures to improve the identification of need, the range and quality of interventions and the evaluation of their impact on improving outcomes.
- A suitable range of strategies are in place to challenge the high-attaining mathematicians, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Pupils are benefiting from a new curriculum, better teaching and expert support from visiting teachers. A new head of mathematics has been appointed, along with three other new mathematics teachers, which is strengthening teaching and having a positive impact on progress in this subject.
- A large proportion of pupils are eligible for support through pupil premium funding. These pupils make good progress and, increasingly, do as well as other pupils nationally.
- Most teaching is very strong and ensures that pupils do well. In a few instances, good classroom practices, such as asking pupils for more detail when they give answers to questions, insistence on neat presentation of work and

providing specific interventions for pupils who have special educational needs, are not well established.

- Pupils are mostly given astute advice about how to improve their work. However, this is not as routine or as widespread as the school expects.
- You and your leadership team have put in place revised arrangements for improving teaching further, reflecting the school's commitment to achieving the highest possible standards. These include more training for all teaching staff.
- Governance is effective. Governors undergo regular training and make an important contribution to improving the school.
- In the small sixth form, students make good progress and a large proportion go on to study at university. Wider sixth-form choice for students is available through The Oaks Sixth Form College, a consortium arrangement with four other local high schools. Carefully delivered careers and study information, advice and guidance ensure that sixth-form students follow courses that are suitable for their interests and levels of ability.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- ensure that middle leaders insist on the consistent implementation of any teaching and learning strategies agreed by the school
- strengthen further the early identification of pupils' specific needs, arrange suitable intervention, including by subject teachers, and check on its impact with greater frequency.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Cladingbowl
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, inspectors held meetings with you and other senior leaders, groups of pupils, members of staff and representatives of the governing body. Inspectors observed teaching across the school, including through joint visits to classrooms with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors spoke to pupils about their progress, looked at samples of their writing and other work in different subjects and observed pupils' conduct in classrooms and around the school. Inspectors scrutinised a range of key documents, including the school's

information on pupils' progress, attendance, behaviour and safety. Inspectors took account of responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and one accompanying free-text comment. They took account of 36 responses to the staff questionnaire.