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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Tristram Hobson
Headteacher
The Swanage School
High Street
Swanage
Dorset
BH19 2PH

Dear Mr Hobson

Short inspection of The Swanage School

Following my visit to the school on 13 March 2018 with John White, 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 May 2015.

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 ensured that the strengths identified at that time are still very evident now. The school has a strong reputation in the local community. Pupils and the great majority of parents are very enthusiastic about the quality of education. They also appreciate the high standard of care and support which the school offers to all pupils, but particularly vulnerable pupils. These include pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Several parents made this point personally to inspectors during the inspection.

Behaviour is very good. Pupils take great pride in their work, including its presentation. They are excellent ambassadors for the school. This is in large part due to the emphasis you place on encouraging pupils to grow as reflective, independent-minded young citizens. Pupils thrive on taking on responsibilities as members of the school council, as house captains and in other roles. They enjoy celebrating their successes.

Since the school began its life in 2013, there have been many strengths, particularly in fostering pupils' personal development. Although there was a dip in performance in 2017, you, other members of the leadership team and governors immediately took steps to correct those aspects of the school where there was underperformance. You have never been complacent and the school is once again ensuring that it prepares pupils well for the next stage of their education and the wider world after leaving The Swanage School.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, and that records are compliant. You have a comprehensive safeguarding policy which staff understand, as they demonstrated to inspectors. Staff know how to recognise any signs of potential concern and how to react. Governors also understand their responsibilities. The school regularly updates governors and staff to raise awareness of potential issues such as extremism, misuse of technology and bullying.

Your staff respond very well to the needs of vulnerable pupils. Staff know pupils well as individuals. Staff give good advice to pupils on how to keep safe. When necessary, the school uses its good links with external agencies. Staff monitor pupils' well-being very thoroughly, thereby ensuring that the school is a very orderly and welcoming community with safeguarding as an integral part of its culture.

Inspection findings

- We agreed with you at the start of the inspection on particular lines of enquiry. The first of these focused on pupils' achievement, particularly in key stage 4. We looked at the achievement of particular groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and the most able pupils. We considered variations in pupils' achievement across different GCSE subjects. The Swanage School is small by national standards, with some subjects having a relatively small take-up, so that statistical analysis has to be treated with caution. Our analysis took account of this fact.
- The school was successful in its GCSE results in 2016, the first year in which pupils in the school sat external examinations. However, the 2017 results showed a dip in pupils' performance. The dip was particularly marked in some of the key stage 4 optional subjects. There were also some variations in the performance of groups of pupils, both by gender and in relation to their prior attainment. During the inspection we talked about the reasons for these variations. We also looked at assessment data on pupils currently in the school, for all classes. Inspectors scrutinised pupils' work extensively.
- You were able to demonstrate the reasons for underperformance in 2017. Some of these were to do with the quality of teaching. Crucially, you have tackled the causes of underperformance, and are confident that the school is back on track to meet its current targets. If these are met, the school will surpass some of its successes from 2016.
- Pupils' performance in the core subjects of English and mathematics has always been strong. For example, the school has a strong record of success in English literature. This success has continued. Pupils' performance in English and mathematics combined is now above the national average. We saw the quality of English work during the inspection. For example, pupils wrote with depth and insight about their studies of Shakespeare and other authors such as Steinbeck. Achievement in mathematics has improved. Pupils who are behind in their learning get extra support from staff in English and mathematics. We saw this

having a positive impact during the inspection. The progress of these pupils has improved.

- Inspectors saw good-quality work in some of the optional subjects studied at key stage 4. For example, we saw a good standard of in-depth writing in geography. History is a strongly performing subject. There are still some variations in the quality of work, for example within science. When pupils write up their work in science, they do it in more depth in some aspects than in others. You rightly have a focus in your school improvement plan on further reducing the variations between pupils' performance in different subjects.
- The gap in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils compared with other pupils has been reduced, although you recognise that this is another area which can be improved further. Staff give good support to pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, and their progress has benefited from this. You ensure that the most able pupils make good progress because teachers usually give them tasks which are sufficiently challenging.
- Our second line of enquiry related to the first. It focused on the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels, and the success of the curriculum, in meeting the needs of pupils and addressing last year's decline in performance. You have taken significant and effective steps to bring about improvement. There had been some teaching concerns before the current school year. You put support in place for those teachers who needed it, to ensure that they met the needs of all their pupils more effectively. You have not shied away from taking further steps to ensure more consistent teaching, including making staff changes. You make sure that all staff have regular opportunities for professional development, in order to maintain high levels of confidence and skill.
- Your curriculum leaders play a crucial role in supporting staff by checking the quality of teaching and learning, and ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs of all pupils. You have made changes in the organisation of classes to assist staff in managing this effectively. Staff now make better use of assessment data when preparing sufficiently challenging tasks for the range of abilities in their classes, although this remains an area for continued development. Staff follow the school policy on how they give feedback to pupils about their learning.
- You have high expectations, as do your staff. You give pupils interesting challenges, to which they respond enthusiastically. You focus strongly on developing pupils' independent learning skills and their ability to reflect on their learning. You encourage pupils to take on responsibilities and to enjoy curriculum enrichment opportunities, which feed in to their academic successes.
- Our final line of enquiry concerned attendance. This has been an issue for the school since the previous inspection. Rates of attendance have not been high enough, particularly for vulnerable pupils. Attendance has remained below average, although the figures have been affected by the small number of pupils in a small school. A very small number of persistently absent pupils has had a disproportionate impact on the attendance statistics.
- We acknowledge that you and your staff have worked hard, and continue to work hard, to resolve this issue. Secure attendance procedures mean that any

absences are quickly followed up. You use a range of measures to encourage the few absentees, and their parents, to take the issue of attendance more seriously because it has a negative impact on achievement. Attendance has a major focus in your improvement plan, and we discussed ways in which the school might strengthen its already considerable efforts to improve it.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- continue the focus on improving attendance, so that it rises to at least the national average and non-attenders have more opportunities to achieve well in school
- further raise attainment and progress, particularly in optional subjects at key stage 4, by:
 - continuing to reduce the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others
 - reducing remaining variations in performance between subjects other than English and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

John Laver
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors visited all of the school's classrooms, accompanied by members of the senior leadership team, in order to observe pupils' learning and behaviour.

Inspectors had meetings with school leaders and several staff. The lead inspector met with five governors. He also met with four parents, at their request.

An inspector met with several older pupils. Inspectors carried out an extensive scrutiny of pupils' books.

The inspection team looked at a range of documents, including the school improvement plan, assessment data on the progress of pupils currently in the school and various documents relating to safeguarding.

Inspectors analysed the 63 responses to the parental questionnaire, Parent View. They also looked at the school's own survey of parents' views.