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Mr Dan Nearney
Head of Centre
Stevenage Education Support Centre
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Dear Mr Nearney

Short inspection of Stevenage Education Support Centre

Following my visit to the school on 29 March 2017 with Ofsted Inspector Sharon Wilson, 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment, your leadership has strengthened the school further. It is now securely good. Policies are up to date. Procedures are more systematic. Expectations of pupils and staff are high. You and your staff work well as a team to provide pupils with the support they need to re-engage in learning and enjoy school life. Staff and governors told us that, under your leadership, the school has improved significantly.

Links with local school leaders, several of whom serve on the school's governing board, are well established. This has helped to monitor the quality of support for pupils within the centre and determine the type of outreach services provided for local schools. The primary and secondary school leaders we met with during the inspection praised the work done by you and your staff, describing the service as 'invaluable'.

Teaching is good. It is based firmly on forging good relations with pupils and setting high expectations for their behaviour. Teachers use their good subject knowledge and thorough understanding of each pupil to plan learning that stimulates their interest and meets their needs. Your staff are experts in managing challenging behaviour. From pupils' arrival to their departure each day, staff oversee their achievement, care and welfare with remarkable patience, tolerance and understanding.

The curriculum is suitably matched to pupils' needs. Pupils join at different times of the year. Most of them have significant gaps in their knowledge due to their poor attendance or exclusion from school. Regular lessons in English, mathematics and science enable them to make significant gains in their literacy, numeracy and scientific understanding. Activities are linked well to everyday-life situations to make learning enjoyable, meaningful and relevant.

Attendance records show that most pupils attend regularly. Pupils understand the expectations of them. They know the sanctions for poor behaviour. Your staff are adept at modifying pupils' behaviour. This enables pupils to re-engage and remain in learning, and benefit from the wide range of enrichment activities provided. You provide an exceptional range of off-site visits to broaden pupils' understanding and experiences.

You achieve the school's core aim of reintegrating pupils back into education. Following their short stay with you, the majority of pupils return to mainstream education and stay there. Those with the most challenging behavioural and emotional needs are helped to gain placements in local special schools. The outreach support your staff provide for pupils at risk of exclusion from school is highly effective. Records show that the large majority of pupils given additional support manage to remain in their mainstream school. Only a very small minority of them enrol with you on a full-time basis.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding pupils is prioritised. The single central record is maintained fully. All necessary checks are made of adults applying to work with children. Your designated lead teacher for child protection ensures that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. She demonstrates a thorough understanding of the policies and procedures for safeguarding children. Pupils and their backgrounds are known well. Detailed records of incidents and concerns are well maintained. Staff training is kept up to date. Partnerships with a wide range of support agencies are firmly established.

Inspection findings

- To gauge whether the school remained good, we followed four key lines of enquiry during the inspection. These were based on analysis of the information available on your school's website, and the issues raised in its last inspection. We focused on: actions taken to improve the quality of teaching; the curriculum and how effectively it enables pupils to re-engage in learning; the extent to which the school promotes pupils' personal development, behaviour, welfare and attendance; and the impact you, other leaders and staff have had on tackling the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.
- Teaching is good. Your teachers make the most of the school's excellent facilities and good range of learning resources, including computers, to provide pupils with a rich, stimulating environment in which to learn. Learning is planned according to individual pupils' needs and interests. Clear explanations and one-to-one

support enable pupils to make good progress. Pupils who complete work promptly are given additional tasks to extend their learning.

- Staff establish good relations with and win the trust of pupils. In lessons, pupils benefit greatly from the good teaching and intensive, one-to-one support provided for them. Individual plans enable staff to monitor how effectively each pupil is doing against the targets set for them. Until recently, teachers have assessed pupils' learning in each subject using their own criteria. You have recently implemented revised procedures to improve the consistency of this information. More time is needed to embed these new arrangements and check that they provide a more accurate overview of pupils' progress.
- Testing on entry shows that pupils' reading skills are usually underdeveloped. Paired reading every day, reading aloud to adults and silent reading during tutorials all help pupils to gain confidence and enjoy reading. Our scrutiny of pupils' books showed that they write in a range of styles. Teachers effectively use mini-projects, such as the second world war and the Victorians, to stimulate pupils' creative writing.
- Pupils told us that they particularly enjoy science because it is made interesting through practical tasks. Technical language is explained fully and reinforced through regular spelling tests. In art, pupils respond positively to the rich, therapeutic environment provided for them by behaving well, applying themselves fully and developing good relations with staff.
- Basic literacy skills are developed effectively by applying them to real-life situations. For example, pupils prepare for off-site visits by writing letters for permission, preparing checklists and planning itineraries. They develop their mathematical understanding by calculating the cost of travel, food and hiring equipment.
- You provide a wide range of experiences to promote pupils' personal development and improve their behaviour. Pupils know that if they produce good-quality work they can gain raffle tickets and have the chance to win prizes at the end of term. They understand that you expect them to attend and behave well before allowing them to participate in enrichment activities. To ensure that all pupils have the chance to engage in these activities, an external counsellor is suitably deployed to listen to and talk with those in need of further emotional and behavioural support.
- A new minibus donated to the school has enabled you to enrich the curriculum through regular off-site visits. This has had a significant impact on pupils' engagement with the local community and in broadening their understanding of the wider world. Outdoor learning activities are exceptional. For example, last year, 10 pupils prepared for and then completed a seven-day sailing expedition aboard a sailing barge around the Isle of Wight.
- Your promotion to head of centre and new appointments made since the last inspection have added further capacity to improve the school. Staff have responded well to your drive for improvement. They show a corporate willingness to support you in securing further improvements. Your evaluation identifies accurately the school's strengths and weaknesses and the actions needed to

improve it. Detailed plans for improvement are in place. These include clear priorities and timescales, but lack measureable targets to hold you and your staff fully accountable.

- Governance is good. Experienced and effective school leaders, and other professionals, monitor the school's performance effectively. They share your ambitions for the school and the wider services it provides. These include expanding provision to meet the needs of older pupils in need of additional support. To prepare for this, you have prioritised strengthening policy and procedures, and ensuring that the quality of education provided in the centre and through your outreach services meets your high expectations.
- Local school leaders value highly the support provided for their pupils at risk of exclusion. This includes the outreach support provided within their schools, and also during the short periods some pupils spend with you in the centre. The support provided for primary-aged pupils before and during their transition into Year 7 works well. Your staff prepare pupils well for the changes ahead, and visit them in their new schools to help them settle in. Older pupils at risk of being excluded from their mainstream schools benefit from attending the centre's nurturing environment each afternoon to improve their basic skills, gain confidence and develop their self-esteem.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- revised procedures to assess pupils' progress are evaluated fully to ensure that they become embedded, and provide an accurate overview of pupils' learning and progress from their entry to exit from the centre
- plans for improvement are updated to include clear targets that hold you and your staff fully accountable for making improvements.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, your staff, your lead teachers for literacy and mathematics, three members of the governing board, a group of pupils, an external counsellor and two senior teachers from a local secondary school. We

joined your staff and pupils during lunchtime to talk with them and observe their behaviour outside lessons. You and your deputy headteacher joined us in observing them at work in lessons. I reviewed your self-evaluation and improvement plans, safeguarding policy and procedures, including the single central record, and attendance and behaviour records. I considered three free texts sent by parents. Staff and pupil questionnaires were not used.