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Dear Miss Dearden

Short inspection of Dorchester Middle School

Following my visit to the school on 15 November 2018 with Jonathan Jones, 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 March 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Since taking up your post in January 2017, you have articulated an ambition to improve the standard of education that the school provides. You recognise the importance of ensuring that pupils' social and emotional needs are met, but understand that this needs to be aligned to academic outcomes more closely. You have established a team of senior leaders who have the knowledge and the expertise to make the changes required. There have been challenges and you have had to make difficult decisions. However, you have now established priorities accurately and the majority of staff are supportive of senior leaders and positive about the vision for the future.

You were disappointed with the 2018 key stage 2 outcomes, which are indicative that the strategies employed have not had the intended impact as quickly as you would like. Leaders, together with governors, have reflected honestly and have taken appropriate action to remedy the weaknesses in teaching and learning that still exist. You have also recognised the need to bolster the capacity and expertise within the staff team, to make more rapid progress towards achieving your objectives. Recent changes that you have made to the curriculum provide greater challenge for pupils when they begin at the school in Year 5. In addition, you have refined the key stage 3 curriculum, so that pupils develop the skills and understanding required to make the transition to their next phase of education at the end of Year 8.

There remains, however, a commitment to providing meaningful experiences for pupils to engage in enrichment opportunities. This is reflected in 'Dorchester University', where pupils take part in activities throughout the year to develop their sporting, cultural and artistic prowess. Pupils are enthusiastic and are keen to share their learning experiences in activities such as crochet and stone-carving.

Governors are supportive of the school and share the ambition to raise standards. However, they recognise that their ability to monitor the work of senior leaders has not been effective enough in the past. This is because they were not provided with the information they needed. Senior leaders now provide this in a way that has the clarity to enable governors to support and challenge as required. The effectiveness of their role has been developed further by the appointment of governors who have the skills and expertise in key areas of the school's work. They now have a more strategic overview of the standard of education the school provides. Governors have established a positive working relationship with senior leaders and visit the school regularly. There is now a greater transparency about the way in which additional funding, provided for disadvantaged pupils and for the development of literacy and numeracy skills, is used. Governors can now measure the impact of actions more precisely than has been the case in the past.

Since the last inspection, you have implemented more effective ways to evaluate the progress that pupils make throughout the year. This means that you have a better overview of pupils who are not making sufficient progress. You have made changes to subject leadership, so that it is more clearly defined across the two key stages. Therefore, interventions are targeted appropriately and, as a result, there is an improvement in the progress that pupils make as they move through key stage 3.

However, you understand that there is still work to do to improve the quality of teaching, learning and teachers' use of assessment. Notably, this is to ensure that pupils, particularly the most able and those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), are supported to make more rapid progress. Therefore, issues from the previous inspection remain. In addition, a significant minority of parents share concerns about the effectiveness of communication. In their responses to Parent View, Ofsted's survey of opinion, over a third of parents did not feel that the school responded well to the concerns they raised. Over half of parents would like further information from the school about their children's progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders keep records meticulously, which means that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Employment checks are made to ensure that newly appointed staff are suitable to work with children. Staff are trained in child protection procedures, which include protecting pupils from the influences of radicalisation and exploitation. Staff know how to report concerns and receive regular updates to ensure that they are well informed. Staff swiftly act upon information about any pupil at potential risk. Leaders challenge other agencies when they are not satisfied with the actions taken, to help resolve referrals more effectively.

You are rightly proud of the specialist resource base for pupils who have physical disabilities and 'The Hub', which provides support for pupils who have social or emotional needs. The support provided enables pupils to be fully involved in the life of the school.

You are aware of pupils who do not attend school as regularly as they should and have implemented successful strategies to improve attendance. This means that attendance continues to be in line with national averages.

Pupils are welcoming, cheerful and clearly enjoy school. They talk enthusiastically of the work they do to develop their understanding of how to keep themselves healthy. They regularly discuss issues relating to their personal and social development, as a result of an improved curriculum. They are articulate, reflective and community-minded, and understand the importance of respect and diversity. The large majority of pupils say that the school encourages them to respect people from other backgrounds and to treat everyone equally. Pupils say that bullying is rare, but that staff deal with issues effectively when they do occur. They feel safe and know how to keep themselves safe, including when online.

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed on the key lines of enquiry. The first of these focused on the quality of teaching and learning in key stage 2, particularly in writing and mathematics. This is because the progress that pupils have made in recent years has not been strong enough. We considered how effectively leaders monitored the progress that pupils make, particularly disadvantaged pupils, pupils with SEND and the most able.
- Leaders are astutely aware of the performance of these groups and are working hard to develop teachers' practice to maximise the progress that pupils make. They understand that this approach is in its infancy and is not fully embedded or reflected in outcomes. There still exists too much disparity in the quality of teaching.
- Where teaching is stronger, teachers adapt their planning to meet the needs of pupils appropriately. Additional adults support pupils with SEND well. As a result, pupils demonstrate their mathematical understanding and use 'grapple' questions to apply their arithmetical knowledge to solve complex problems. Pupils write with fluency and use varied vocabulary, adapt syntax and use punctuation to create effect.
- Where teaching is weaker, expectations are not high enough. Pupils continue to complete work that is clearly not challenging enough and do not build sequentially on what they already know. The use of assessment does not have sufficient impact on improving the quality of pupils' work, extending the most able pupils or providing the support required. For example, the most able pupils are encouraged to write for a variety of audiences and purpose but are not secure in their understanding of the conventions of genre. Lower-prior-attaining pupils demonstrate inaccuracies in their technical ability. Where these are not

addressed, pupils continue to make similar errors, and this detracts from the quality of their compositions, limiting the progress that pupils make.

- The second line of enquiry centred on the speed with which the weaker rates of progress, seen in all subjects at key stage 2, are rectified in key stage 3. The recent changes to staffing have strengthened the subject specialist knowledge that pupils need in preparation for future study. This means that pupils make improved progress in this phase of their education at the school. Teachers confirm the accuracy of their assessments with other schools and use standardised tests, so that there is greater confidence in the rigour of this information.
- Teachers use questioning skilfully to encourage pupils to articulate their understanding and express their opinions. They are encouraged to justify and elaborate on their ideas. Teachers use resources well to support pupils to structure their writing effectively but, at times, this limits the ability of the most-able pupils to develop their autonomy in writing. However, the quality of teaching is inconsistent. This results in a level of challenge which is often not high enough to extend thinking and develop analytical skills at the appropriate level. Pupils' compliant behaviour is apparent, but where teaching is not well focused, pupils are not able to exercise initiative and independence in their learning. Teachers' feedback does not support pupils to demonstrate that they understand and can apply the skills that will improve the quality of their work.
- The final line of enquiry centred on the capacity of leaders to drive the improvements required. A newly configured middle leadership team is now in place to support senior leaders. Subject and progress leaders recognise their importance in accelerating school improvement. They appreciate the training they receive and say that this has been pivotal in supporting them to fulfil their roles more effectively. Middle leaders say that they are supported by senior leaders and are more involved in strategic decision-making. They are committed to developing their skills, so that they can evaluate the impact of actions more precisely. However, this is in its early stages and has not had time to have a sustained impact.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- recent improvements are sustained, and consistent expectations are applied, so that teachers' practice is consistently good across all subjects
- teachers use assessment information to routinely plan work that matches the learning needs of all pupils, but particularly the most able and pupils with SEND, so that they make more rapid progress
- middle leaders continue to develop their skills, so they can support rapid school improvement
- leaders stringently evaluate the impact of the additional funding provided for disadvantaged pupils and for the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah McGinnis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

At the beginning of the day, inspectors met with you and your leadership team to agree key lines of enquiry. Following this, we visited lessons and scrutinised pupils' written work across a range of subjects and age groups, jointly with leaders. We met with members of the leadership team and representatives from the governing body, curriculum leaders, pastoral managers and pupils. We also scrutinised a range of documentation provided by the school, including policies relating to safeguarding. When making final judgements, we considered 110 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, 26 responses to the staff questionnaire and 103 responses to the questionnaire for pupils provided by Ofsted.