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Ms Donna Atkinson  
Headteacher  
Balfour Infant School  
Pattens Lane  
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Dear Ms Atkinson

### **Short inspection of Balfour Infant School**

Following my visit to the school on Tuesday 3 November 2015, 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 2010.

### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained a good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Last year was a difficult time for the school due to the serious illness and absence of the previous headteacher. Staff and governors supported each other well and made sure that the pupils continued to receive a good education. They kept up the well-established, effective systems and routines for maintaining high-quality provision for pupils both academically and personally.

You stepped into the role of headteacher at the beginning of September. Staff and governors describe this as a seamless transition. You quickly established yourself and have wasted no time in the last few weeks. You have carried out careful checks on safeguarding arrangements and on the quality of teaching and learning. You already know the school, the staff and the children very well. You have the confidence of staff, governors, local authority colleagues and, most importantly, the pupils. The governors told me that you were gently challenging everyone to think and do things differently, try out some new ideas and strive for excellence. Senior leaders and governors are signed up to your vision for excellence at Balfour.

You, senior leaders and subject leaders track very closely how well pupils are achieving in all subjects. Disadvantaged pupils and those with additional or special educational needs receive carefully focused and effective support to help them make good progress. As a result, disadvantaged pupils in Balfour Infant School achieve as well as and sometimes better than other pupils in the school. Pupils behave very well

inside the classrooms, on the corridors, in the lunch hall and on the playground. They are enthusiastic learners who enjoy school.

At the time of the last inspection, the inspector recognised the many strengths of the school, including pupils' achievement, personal development, behaviour and well-being. These continue to be strong and the school's core values of support and nurture, commitment and respect are very evident in practice throughout the school. The inspector identified a need for all teachers to pitch work at the right level and consistently implement agreed assessment and target-setting policies. He also recommended that all subject leaders should make sharper use of information about pupils' progress and achievement. Leaders have addressed all of these effectively so that:

- pupils' reading, writing and mathematics skills have risen since the last inspection and are consistently significantly above the national average by the time they leave the school
- the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils has closed and these pupils now achieve as well as, or better than, other pupils
- children in Reception classes achieve well and there is an improvement in the proportion of boys achieving a good level of development by the time they leave Reception
- the proportion of Year 1 pupils who achieve the expected standard in the phonic screening check has risen every year and is above the national average
- leaders carefully and regularly check the quality of teaching and there is a good focus on the impact that teaching has on pupils' learning and progress
- teachers plan activities carefully to meet the different abilities and needs of the pupils.

You are proud of the school and have a very clear understanding of its strengths, but you also rightly believe that the school can be even better. You and the staff are aware of continuing differences between the achievement of boys in reading and writing and girls in mathematics. Some action has already been taken which is beginning to bring about improvements. Similarly, although pupils achieve well, you and the other leaders know that the pupils, particularly the most able, are capable of doing even better. You are aware that sometimes teaching is 'safe' rather than exciting and challenging, and you are encouraging teachers to try new ideas, aim high, challenge and excite the pupils and lift the quality of learning. You and your leaders carry out accurate self-evaluation but, although you have all identified the correct priorities, this information is not linked precisely enough to your school's improvement plans. The information about attendance from 2013–2014 shows that although overall attendance is about average, some of the disadvantaged pupils had

too many days off school. This was not picked up at the time but you are now carefully analysing the attendance information to make sure that this does not re-occur.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Parents have confidence in the school and its leaders. Parents and pupils say that school is a safe, happy place where the adults look after the children very well. You and other leaders have made sure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You have conducted a thorough review of the policies, procedures and systems designed to make sure that pupils are safe. The systems were already secure but you have revised the policy to make sure it fully complies with the most recent government guidelines. All staff understand their responsibilities and know what to do to keep pupils safe, to be alert to, and to report, any concerns. All staff have undertaken training about how to keep pupils safe from radicalisation and extremism. Checks on the suitability of staff, governors and volunteers are robust and well managed. Governors carry out their responsibilities well. For example, one carries out health and safety checks around the school site every three or four months.

There are high levels of staff supervision at all times and pupils also contribute to the safety of the school. They behave responsibly, are polite, considerate and look out for each other. The school has some awkward spaces in stairwells and corridors as well as a fairly restricted playground. The pupils play enthusiastically but also safely during playtime. They move around school with respect for their own and others' safety.

### **Inspection findings**

- The deputy headteacher, other leaders and governors maintained high-quality provision and secure routines throughout last year. You are ensuring that the strengths are sustained and developed further.
- Leaders' checks on teaching, learning and other aspects of the school's work are very thorough. There is a strong focus on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and development. As a result, leaders at all levels have a very secure understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.
- There is a firm focus on progress from the moment children arrive in Reception until they leave for junior school. You are setting challenging targets which emphasise attainment and progress across all subjects to ensure that pupils achieve all-round success.
- Pupils' knowledge and skills in reading, writing and mathematics, and the progress they make during their time in the school, have improved steadily over the past few years. Pupils in both the Early Years Foundation

Stage and in Key Stage 1 achieve standards which are consistently above national averages.

- The staff are keenly aware of disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils, and leaders make well-planned use of the additional government spending for these groups. Strategies are evaluated carefully to make sure that they are making enough positive difference. The success of the strategies is sharply focused on the impact on attainment and progress. As a result, disadvantaged pupils have made rapid progress and their achievement has accelerated rapidly and is now at least equal to national averages. There are now no significant achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in the school.
- There are gaps in achievement between boys and girls. In Reception, boys have not achieved as well in reading and writing as the girls. The gap was very wide in the past but reduced significantly last year as a result of changes in approaches and in provision. There are now more lively and practical opportunities for speaking, listening and using phonics (letters and the sounds they make) skills. Children already know many sounds and are able to blend them into simple words.
- Boys' achievement in the phonic screening check in Year 1 has also improved over time. Key Stage 1 pupils' writing skills are benefiting from an increased focus on speaking and listening and imaginative opportunities for writing. As a result, boys' writing skills have improved over the past three years and are now above the national average for all pupils.
- However, throughout Key Stage 1, although boys' literacy skills are improving and they are making faster progress than before, they still lag behind the girls. This is because girls' attainment has risen sharply and boys have not made the same rapid progress.
- There was a sharp rise in girls' mathematics skills by the end of Year 2 in 2015 so that they are now almost in line with the boys. You know, however, that not enough girls achieve the highest level in mathematics.
- Although overall reading, writing and mathematics skills are above average, fewer pupils than might be expected reach the highest levels. Teachers plan lessons which cater for different abilities. In some lessons the pitch is very good indeed, with interesting opportunities for pupils to really stretch themselves. Teachers are not all equally adept at adapting learning to make sure there is enough challenge for all pupils, particularly the most able.
- The increasing opportunities for independent, extended writing are benefiting all learners, and the proportion achieving higher than expected skills in writing is improving year by year. However, in some of the pupils'

books, although there is evidence that pupils' writing is improving, the rate of improvement is not as rapid as it could be.

- Pupils' work in mathematics is sometimes safe and not challenging enough. It covers ground they already know. The pupils' books do not show sufficient opportunities for the most-able pupils to grapple with difficult concepts or calculations.
- Although leaders have accurately identified the issues relating to the achievement of boys and girls and the most able, they have not specifically planned actions to address the issues. This is because the links between self-evaluation and improvement planning are not always as strong as they should be.
- Attendance is improving and there has been a pleasing reduction in the number of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, who take too much time off school. Staff rigorously check, follow up and provide sensitive and individualised support for pupils with medical needs.
- Parents and pupils value the school. Adults and children cooperate well. Relationships are warm and respectful. The 'Balfour Way' of strong, clearly articulated values is evident throughout the school and reflected by staff and pupils.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and governors should:

- improve the quality of teaching so that it is all as good as the very best in the school
- increase the challenge for pupils, particularly the most able, by adapting learning more quickly to build on what they already know and can do, and by giving them more opportunities to use their knowledge in different situations
- ensure that there are closer links between the school's accurate self-evaluation and improvement planning.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Medway local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

I met with you, other leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and other staff with responsibilities for attendance and safeguarding records. I met the Chair of the Governing Body and the governor responsible for safeguarding and the Early Years Foundation Stage. I had a telephone discussion with a representative from the local authority. We visited sections of five lessons and also made brief visits to all of the other classes. I looked at pupils' work, in particular a sample of writing and mathematics books from some of the most-able pupils across Key Stage 1. I took account of 27 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire and the school's own parent and pupil questionnaires. I spoke to a number of parents, including a parent governor, at the start of the school day. I spent playtime on the playground with the pupils and had lunch with them in the school hall. I analysed a range of the school's documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, leaders' checks on the quality of teaching and learning, safeguarding checks, policies, procedures and records of training. I also looked at, and discussed with you and other leaders, the evaluation of the school's effectiveness and the current improvement plans.