

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms Michele Geddes
Headteacher
St Meryl School
Carpenders Park
Watford
Hertfordshire
WD19 5BT

Dear Ms Geddes

Short inspection of St Meryl School

Following my visit to the school on 24 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 December 2011.

This school continues to be good.

Since the last inspection, the leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school. You have made a considerable difference since arriving at the school in 2013, quickly establishing a culture of high expectations. Senior leaders have a clear sense of purpose and share your commitment to ensure that all pupils achieve as well as they can. Your strong leadership, and that of the deputy headteacher, has ensured that staff and pupils share your drive for continued improvement. Staff, parents and governors all recognise the significant contribution leaders make to the school.

There have been a number of changes since the last inspection which you have managed well. Virtually the whole teaching staff has changed since you took up post. You have appointed a new deputy head who started at the school in 2014 and many of the senior leaders are relatively new to their roles. With your good support and leadership, all new members of staff have settled well. As a result, an increasing proportion of pupils in the school are making good progress. You and your senior leaders have evaluated thoroughly and accurately what the school does well and what needs to be done to improve it even further. You have paid particular attention to the development of the early years and Key Stage 1. Consequently, pupils are achieving well and are well prepared for the next stage in their education.

Key aspects of the school's work have been shared comprehensively with governors and you have developed an effective working relationship with the new Chair of the Governing Body. Individual governors are linked to priorities in the school's plan for improvement and are actively involved in checking the progress that is being made. Everyone is working together to achieve the vision of becoming an outstanding school. As a result, pupils make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Progress in some other subjects, such as science, is not as rapid but is improving. Middle leaders are developing effective systems to show how progress is assessed and evaluated. They are doing this, for example, by recording pupils' outcomes in photographs emulating the good practice in the early years.

The Early Years Foundation Stage has improved considerably since the last inspection. It is now well resourced and very effectively led and managed. Most children enter the early years with development that is typical for their age. Children make good progress and, at the end of the Reception Year in 2015, the proportion of children attaining a good level of development continues to be above the national average. You have introduced teacher visits to see children in their homes prior to starting at the school. This has helped teachers to get to know the children more quickly and plan activities that develop all children's learning. The majority of the children in the Nursery transfer to the Reception class, which helps to ensure that their learning is built upon and continues apace. Leaders have ensured very effective links with the Year 1 teacher and, as a result, children are well prepared for the transition into Key Stage 1.

The emphasis you have placed on developing the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of the curriculum is clearly evident. The school has achieved the Bronze and Silver Eco School award as well as its first green flag, and is now working towards achieving the Rights Respecting School Award. You have also developed links with children overseas, through the Send a Friend to School project. This work is helping pupils to develop a very good understanding of community life inside and outside of their school. Pupils get on well together, both in the classroom and during breaktimes. Their behaviour is good and pupils across the school show very positive attitudes to learning. The quality of discussion and depth of understanding between pupils during some lessons is excellent. This is because pupils are regularly encouraged to talk to each other about what they are learning. In a 'circle time' lesson seen during my visit, Year 6 pupils were talking about stealing and the effect it might have on the victim. One pupil said, 'It's not just that someone has broken into your house. It is much more about whether what has been stolen is of sentimental value. That must be worse.'

High expectations and aspirations are at the heart of your work. You regularly check on the quality of teaching in the school and have recognised some outstanding practice. You have arranged for colleagues to work together to enable the sharing of this expertise and to develop further any areas for improvement. This has helped to establish a team which is eager to learn in a supportive environment. You have

made a good start on the school's new assessment system. However, you recognise that there is still more work to do to secure the system across the school so that the information can be used most effectively to identify any underachievement. You have worked with other schools to ensure that teachers have a clear understanding of what is expected in the new curriculum. Pupils' books show that gaps in pupils' learning are being robustly checked and addressed in teachers' planning of future learning.

Safeguarding is effective.

Your systems for checking on all aspects of safeguarding are robust and thorough. Pupils say that they feel safe and if they have any worries they know who to go to for help. The overwhelming majority of parents and carers agree that the school keeps pupils safe and secure. You have provided regular and frequent training to ensure that staff understand how to identify and report concerns effectively. The school's records indicate that any issues are followed up promptly and extensively, communicating with parents in a variety of ways that suit the individual needs of families. Any absence is followed up quickly. Leaders and governors have been very clear with parents and pupils about the importance of being in school regularly and on time. The result has been an increase in pupil attendance with very little lateness.

Inspection findings

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors praised many aspects of the school's work. They recognised the good achievement of pupils supported by a rich range of learning opportunities. They highlighted a couple of areas for improvement which you have taken action to tackle. Your actions have had a positive impact on moving the school forward.

- The drive for continued improvement in the quality of teaching is evident in the sustained attainment of pupils in the early years, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Although there was a dip in results in Key Stage 1 in 2014, you quickly addressed this issue so that in 2015 the school's results were once again above the national average. The teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters represent) has improved through targeted support and professional development. As a consequence, results improved considerably in 2015 to above the national average.
- The school's own assessment information is developing. It shows that the proportion of pupils who are achieving expected progress in reading and writing is improving, but mathematics lags behind in some classes. The proportion of pupils achieving better than expected progress in mathematics and writing improved in 2015 to above the national average. The school's current cohort of pupils in Year 6 is on track to achieve the national average in 2016. This group made good progress last year and there is evidence in pupils' books to show that this is continuing. You and your senior leaders are robustly reviewing areas for

development so that all pupils continue to make good progress. For example, the additional resource you have put into Year 6 to enable pupils to learn in smaller groups is already paying dividends.

- You have identified accurately key priorities and are taking appropriate action to address them. For example, you have ensured that staff meeting time has been dedicated to developing teachers' skills in challenging pupils, particularly the most able. Some teachers are expert at focusing pupils' learning, making pupils think hard about what they are learning and challenging them to be as good as they can be. As a result, these teachers are providing very good role models for both staff and pupils. You have shown that this approach is developing some teachers well while also ensuring that your high expectations are met. However, some of the most-able pupils, particularly in Key Stage 1 and lower Key Stage 2, are not being challenged to achieve their potential. Leaders have identified this on their action plans and are taking decisive actions to address this area. Leaders must now ensure that their monitoring focus is on the effectiveness of the provision for the most-able pupils. This will enable leaders to hold teachers to account for improvement in pupils' progress and attainment.
- Leaders and governors have worked in partnership with pupils and parents to raise the profile of regular attendance. Pupils are responding well to the rewards that you have put in place and are eager to get the 100% attendance award. The Chair of the Governing Body has also communicated a very clear message, in letters, to the few parents who do not send their children to school regularly that this is not acceptable. As a result of such initiatives, attendance has risen.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the most-able pupils make as much progress as they can in English and mathematics
- the proportion of pupils in all classes making better than expected progress in mathematics continues to rise
- the school's new assessment system is secure throughout the school so that the information can be used even more effectively to address any underachievement rapidly.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you, your senior and middle leaders and the Chair of the Governing Body. I also spoke with a representative from the local authority. I visited a number of classes, some with you, to observe teaching and look at pupils' work. I met a group of pupils and spoke with many others during lessons and break times. You provided me with recent information about pupils' progress, which I evaluated. We looked together at pupils' work in books. I reviewed records about keeping pupils safe and about attendance. I also examined a wide range of other documentary evidence, including that relating to the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans and ongoing monitoring. Views of parents from Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were considered, as were the views of 21 staff that completed Ofsted's questionnaire.