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Mr Nic Fiddaman
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Dear Mr Fiddaman

Short inspection of The Academy of Woodlands

Following my visit to the academy on 2 February 2016, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in October 2011.

This academy continues to be good.

You have led the academy with steadfast determination to ensure that pupils receive high-quality education. You have successfully galvanised staff and parents to share your vision that the academy be at the heart of the community and that everyone connected to it should have the highest expectations of what pupils can achieve. Your ambition for pupils is reflected in their own aspirations and in their exceptional response to learning opportunities.

Pupils across the academy make at least expected progress from their various starting points, and many pupils make accelerated progress. This progress is enabled because you ensure that information about how well pupils are doing is analysed by all staff to target those who need extra support to catch up with their peers. As a result, a very high proportion of pupils reach expected levels by the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Pupils often reach levels of attainment above national averages, evidenced through the exceptionally strong achievement of Year 1 pupils in the phonics (the sounds that letters make) screening test in 2015. This strong achievement could be enhanced further by raising the proportion of pupils who reach the highest levels of achievement in all key stages, especially for pupils who are disadvantaged, and by increasing the number of children who achieve the standards expected for their age by the end of early years.

Because you know the strengths and areas for future development so well, you have driven improvement and effected transformation in many areas since the last inspection. For example, the range of subjects offered to pupils is broad and pupils have a wealth of opportunities to engage with exciting activities and trips that make learning fun. Consequently, academy leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You know what needs to be accomplished to make the academy even better. For instance, because you want pupils to have the very best start to their education, academy leaders are rightly focused on improving further the quality of provision and outcomes for children in early years.

You and your staff have worked effectively to meet the recommendations from the previous inspection. The number of children in early years has grown considerably this year. You have ensured that the learning environment is welcoming and bright and enables all areas of learning to be facilitated. The early years leader is working hard to make certain that information about how well children are doing is used to help plan activities that will help them make progress, and to check that no children fall behind. Adults engage in meaningful dialogue with children, but do not consistently grasp opportunities to deepen children's understanding or ask questions that encourage them to think deeply about what they are doing or learning. Staff have strong relationships with parents and are seeking ways to further improve the partnership between school and home. Medway's early years services have provided valuable feedback and support that have been received positively by the academy. The early years leader is building collaborations with other schools to share good practice, and recognises the value in developing this further. As a result, since the last inspection, there has been a gradual improvement in the number of children reaching expected standards of achievement by the end of early years. The proportion is now in line with national figures. Although gaps between the achievement of children who are eligible for free school meals, disabled children, or those who have special educational needs and their peers are closing, academy leaders have identified that still more work needs to be done to continue to reduce this disparity.

Pupils have a clear understanding of what they need to do to improve their learning because they are given targets in each subject which they know and understand. Teachers provide pupils with clear learning objectives in lessons, and because of this, pupils are clear about what they need to achieve to be successful. The previous inspection identified that pupils, particularly girls, required greater opportunities to problem solve in mathematics. Pupils' work shows that this has been addressed and pupils are provided with plenty of opportunities to solve problems and apply what they know in mathematics.

Safeguarding is effective.

Academy leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. This is underpinned by the depth of knowledge staff have about all pupils, who are nurtured in a caring environment. Equality of opportunity is central to the academy's ethos. Leaders have ensured that British values are woven into the curriculum and that pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural experiences support this. Leaders have worked hard to engage wider expertise, such as from counsellors, to help pupils in need of additional support. Thorough checks are made on adults when they work or volunteer at the academy and staff are well trained in child protection procedures. Pupils say that they feel safe and are taught how to keep themselves safe through visits from the fire brigade, for example.

Inspection findings

- You have instilled a culture of high expectations that has cascaded throughout the academy and consequently leaders, including governors, are driven to continually improve the academy. All staff are keen to make sure that the academy keeps on providing the best possible experience for all pupils and their families. A governor succinctly verbalised this by stating, 'There is no ceiling to what can be achieved'.
- Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are exemplary. They are extremely expressive about how fortunate they feel to attend the academy and how much they value the facilities and opportunities that are given to them. Pupils are polite, empathetic, considerate and thoughtful because they are cloaked in an environment that exudes care and places them at the very heart of what it does.
- You have achieved your goal of making the academy central to the community and facilitate it as a hub for communal use by opening the doors to the wider public and therefore impacting on the lives of people beyond the academy gate. The seven-day provision you provide, including access to Saturday school, the sports hall, gymnasium and coffee shop, fosters a welcoming environment that benefits the academy and its pupils. A parent expressed their view by saying, 'The glue of the school is Mr Fiddaman – he makes the school what it is, a community. He leads from the front and the children and parents respect him'.
- Leaders have worked diligently to create an enriched programme of learning for pupils, including access to free musical tuition. Lessons are well planned to provide an interesting range of learning experiences. During this inspection, the whole of Year 4 were dressed up as Anglo-Saxons for the day. Pupils engaged in practical activities, such as grinding flour, playing musical instruments, examining jewellery and artefacts, and weaving. Subsequently, pupils are motivated and engaged; a love of learning is endemic throughout the academy.

- The needs of pupils entitled to support through pupil premium funding are well met. This additional funding given by the government is allocated effectively to ensure that academic, emotional and social needs of pupils are provided for. No stone is left unturned to enable all pupils, including the most-able pupils, to make progress to close gaps in achievement. For example, pupils can attend school on Saturday to receive extra support in their learning, and there are additional lessons for the most-able pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. The impact of this funding is analysed thoroughly to make sure that interventions are making a difference. Owing to this work, you and your team have ensured that gaps are closing, and indeed, the proportion of pupils reaching expected levels is often in broadly in line with their peers. There is still more work to be done to close the attainment gap in early years and to ensure that a larger number of eligible pupils reach the highest levels of attainment.
- Pupils make an excellent start in acquiring skills that help them in the early stages of learning to read. They are taught the sounds that letters make, known as phonics, effectively. This is evidenced through the especially high number of pupils who reach the expected standards in the phonics screening test, which pupils take at the end of Year 1.
- You draw upon accurate assessment of pupils' learning to consider carefully where there is need for improvement. After a drive to improve pupils' early reading skills, you are now focused on improving writing and mathematics still further. The early years leader is supporting this aim by prioritising mathematical learning opportunities within the environment. This will help to target the small number of children who have yet to make progress in number. There is clear evidence that teachers enable pupils to make accelerated progress. For example, whereas a quarter of pupils currently in Year 2 did not achieve the early learning goal in mathematics at the end of Reception Year, 89% are now on track to reach expected levels for their age by the end of Year 2.
- Predicted outcomes for pupils, based on careful analysis of achievement and progress information, are high across the academy. The proportion of pupils working at a standard expected for their age in Key Stage 1 is also high and this bodes very well for the future. Precise analysis of pupils' performance has made you acutely aware that more pupils could reach the highest levels of attainment.
- You have worked hard to make sure that pupils attend every day. You have put in place innovative strategies and introduced exciting incentives to tackle lateness and to reduce the number of holidays taken during term time. For instance, you have changed the term dates so that there are six equal terms and have reduced the length of the summer holiday, partly to enable families to plan holidays at less expensive times. Despite implementing a range of strategies and working closely with the attendance advisory practitioner, attendance levels remain stubbornly just below the national average, although there are signs that this is improving.

- Parents' views on the academy are overwhelmingly positive. One parent summed this up by saying, 'I cannot say enough how proud I am to say that my children attend The Academy of Woodlands'. Parents feel involved. They are happy with the progress that their children make and are particularly complimentary about the welcome they receive from all staff.
- The governing body shares your vision for the future of the academy and makes a strong contribution to strategic leadership. They are well informed and knowledgeable about the strengths of the academy and what needs to be developed further. They are actively involved in evaluating the work of the academy and in targeting areas for improvement. They have endeavoured to widen their own skills and expertise so that they can offer increasingly effective challenge and support to school leaders. Governors discharge their statutory duties well, including those relating to safeguarding.

Next steps for the academy

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the proportion of children reaching expected standards by the end of early years continues to rise so that pupils have the very best possible start to their education, by:
 - ensuring that all staff are able to engage confidently in dialogue with children that helps to develop their thinking skills and deepen their understanding
 - continuing to close gaps in achievement for groups of pupils, especially those eligible for pupil premium funding
 - further developing collaborative work with other schools to share practice.
- more pupils reach the highest levels of attainment, particularly those who are disadvantaged
- the academy continues to work alongside parents to bring attendance in line with, or above, the national average for primary schools.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Medway Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Abigail Birch
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the deputy headteacher, the early years leader, the special educational needs coordinator, the family liaison officer, those responsible for safeguarding, the office manager and two members of the governing body. We visited all Nursery classes, and classes in all year groups throughout the academy. I spoke to pupils in lessons and met with them formally to gather their views and look at their work in a range of subjects. I took account of 31 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 26 written contributions by parents which were also made online. I spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day. I analysed a range of the academy's documentation, including information about school improvement, pupils' achievement, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. I also looked at and discussed with you the evaluation of the academy's effectiveness.