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Mrs Franziska Murray
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Murray

Short inspection of Southill Lower School

Following my visit to your school on 2 February 2016 with Maria Curry, Her Majesty's 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 2011.

This school continues to be good.

Southill Lower School successfully combines the friendly community feel of a small village school with the ambition and outward-looking philosophy of a much larger one. Much has been achieved since the last inspection almost five years ago. Governors rightly assert that the school is now stronger and, even though it has not all been 'plain sailing' during this period, you realise your vision as 'a school to be proud of, a place where all are valued and a haven for children'.

Given the school's small size, there has been a significant turnover in staff, with all class teachers new to the school since the last inspection. Staff changes in early years, where you used to teach, have impeded improvements in the early years, and only now do you have the foundations to strengthen provision in the Reception class. Apart from staffing, there have been two significant developments since 2011. The accommodation has been enhanced by the excellent new Reception classroom, and the federation with Shelton Lower School has brought a number of other changes. As headteacher across both schools, you do not have to maintain a teaching commitment and have time to effectively steer the strategic development of each school. The single governing body has drawn on the strengths of each set of governors, and is highly effective in leading both schools and holding staff to account.

Your school's vision statement states: 'We are committed to delivering an exciting and challenging curriculum made accessible to all in a caring, family school environment.' The school's small size means not only that every pupil is known by each adult, but also that all pupils know one another and see themselves as a mutually supportive community. This was conveyed very eloquently by the pupils themselves when explaining how the 'friendship bench' works, and how the school's values, such as 'thoughtfulness' and 'humour', help them to cheer one another up when they are unhappy.

A lot of work has gone into developing an interesting and challenging curriculum, which is reflected in the lively displays and attractive resources in each of the three classrooms. Units of work, such as 'space' in Years 3 and 4, effectively link different areas of learning and draw on topical events, such as the everyday life of the British astronaut on the space station. All this helps to fire pupils' imaginations and promotes an inquisitiveness and love of learning that will stand pupils in good stead in the future.

One test of good leadership is the way that leaders respond to unexpected challenges to resolve problems. You and your governing body have skilfully handled staffing difficulties, while also developing the federation with Shelton Lower School to secure benefits both for pupils and staff at each school. You recognise that more can be done to stretch and deepen pupils' learning, notably at either end of the school's age range, and have identified the right priorities to achieve this.

Pupils enjoy lessons and, as well as English and mathematics, were quick to list subjects such as computing, physical education and music among their favourites. This is because teachers who come to school to teach these subjects make them fun. Pupils are encouraged to be creative and to be unafraid of making mistakes in their pursuit of high standards. This successful approach can be seen when comparing pupils' draft work and their neatly completed writing in Years 3 and 4, and in some of the homework produced by pupils in Years 1 and 2, such as their versions of 'Green Eggs and Ham'. Pupils develop confidence in their own abilities, both when working with others and when they have to complete assignments on their own. They are consequently well prepared for the next stage in their schooling.

Parents spoken to by inspectors were very positive about the school, particularly those with older children or pupils with specific needs. They said that they are impressed with the way that the school meets children's individual needs and the way it prepares pupils for middle school. Some parents are anxious about the federation, partly because you have to divide your time between the two schools. Parents responding on Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, are not unanimously positive about the school. Of the 12 responses, two or three respondents disagreed with several statements, although there was a general consensus that children feel safe.

Safeguarding is effective

Safeguarding arrangements meet all statutory requirements. The school website contains all the required information. You and your governors take every precaution

to ensure that pupils are safe at school, and have established a strong safeguarding culture. Meticulous recording systems are in place, and leaders and governors are rigorous in making necessary checks to keep a careful oversight of safeguarding. Policies are updated annually and you make sure that all procedures are understood by staff. Staff training is fully up to date and staff know what to do if there are any concerns about a pupil.

Inspection findings

- Leaders, including governors, have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and strengthened teaching across the school. You have successfully maintained the good quality of education and have further raised standards in Key Stage 1.
- The school's self-evaluation shows that you have an accurate view of the school's strengths. Regular checks enable leaders to respond swiftly when there is any sign of underachievement, however small, and take remedial action. This is illustrated by your introduction of 'Wow Writing', in response to one set of weaker results several years ago, which immediately reversed the decline.
- Your current school development plan identifies the right priorities, but the planned actions are too broad and are not linked to specific outcomes against which you can evaluate your success. More sharply detailed planning would clarify expectations for staff and give improvements a greater sense of urgency, as well as focusing your monitoring of impact.
- Although small cohorts make analysis of any single set of results unreliable, there is a rising trend in attainment in Key Stage 1, where pupils achieve well. Standards in reading, writing and mathematics are above the national figures. Results in the Year 1 phonics screening test have shown a steady increase over the last three years to above average, and this is reflected in pupils' above-average standards in reading at the end of Year 2. High standards in English and mathematics are sustained by pupils in Years 3 and 4.
- In contrast, outcomes for children in early years were at or below national figures in 2014 and 2015. Given that children's skills and aptitudes are broadly typical when they start school, their progress in early years was not impressive. You recognised this weakness, and strengthening provision in Reception has been a key priority this year. Assessment information indicates that the current Reception children are on track to do rather better, and also provides reassuring evidence that pupils currently in Years 1 and 2 are achieving well.
- Collaboration has brought immediate financial benefits, as well as more efficient management and stronger leadership, including subject leadership. Federation has enabled staff to share resources, planning and leadership responsibilities, which can otherwise be very onerous for subject leaders in small schools.

- By combining classes from each school and pooling resources, you are able to introduce initiatives and provide enrichment for pupils that one school alone could not afford. Examples include the development of a more lively and engaging curriculum, and enrichment activities such as 'history off the page' days, a theatre trip to Northampton to see A Christmas Carol and residential trips.
- Pupils' behaviour, which was judged to be good at the last inspection, is undoubtedly a strength of the school. Pupils say that they enjoy school and feel safe. They say that there is no bullying and they are confident that they can turn to a trusted adult if anything makes them unhappy.
- The lively curriculum enthuses pupils and effectively promotes their personal development and positive attitudes to learning. Key Stage 1 pupils, for example, talked excitedly about making puppets, writing the script and even designing tickets for their performance of Cinderella. Pupils have an impressive range of enrichment opportunities within the school day and with after-school activities. Pupils spoke about the different clubs that they enjoy, including football, table tennis, dance and music. All older pupils learn the recorder and some go on to play other instruments.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that the drive to establish outstanding teaching and exceptional outcomes, in each class and across every key stage, is promoted by sharper planning and review by:

- detailing more specific actions to strengthen provision
- linking planned actions to measurable outcomes that can be analysed
- ensuring that lesson observations, staff work scrutiny, and other monitoring by leaders and governors is narrowly focused on specific priorities.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, three representatives from the governing body and a group of pupils. Inspectors also spoke informally to staff, pupils and parents. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including information about safeguarding, school development planning and pupil outcomes. All teachers were observed teaching and pupils' work was evaluated.