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Mrs Back
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Back

Short inspection of Graham James Primary Academy

Following my visit to the school on 17 March 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 the school converted to an academy in May 2013.

This school continues to be good

You have been successful in maintaining the good quality of education at the school. You have worked effectively with other school leaders, including governors, to ensure that the school has continued to improve during a period of growth, which has seen the school rapidly increase in size over the past two years. The passion that you share with staff and governors for the school to be the best it can be is seen in the strong outcomes for pupils across the school and the significant improvements that have been made to the teaching of reading over recent months.

The growth in pupil numbers has necessitated extensions to the school building over the past two years. You have managed these developments effectively, ensuring that the focus has remained on the quality of teaching and learning. All classrooms and shared areas are attractive and welcoming. Displays of pupils' work help to generate a real pride among pupils and give the strong impression to any visitors that Graham James is a good school. Staff, pupils, parents and governors are supportive of your leadership.

As a result of your work:

- children get off to an excellent start in the early years foundation stage
- pupils behave extremely well and demonstrate good attitudes to learning
- the teaching of reading and writing has improved and, across the school, most pupils make good progress in these areas
- the small number of disadvantaged pupils, and those with special educational needs or disability, receive good support and make good progress.

Along with other senior leaders, including governors, you are ambitious for the school to improve further. You have developed good plans to build on the improvements that have been made and, during this inspection, demonstrated the capacity to move the school forward rapidly.

Safeguarding is effective.

Senior leaders have ensured that safeguarding is effective and that all statutory requirements are met. The school's single central record is well kept and reflects the effective systems which are in place to keep children safe and secure. It is checked regularly by the safeguarding governor. Arrangements for the safer recruitment of new staff are robust.

Pupils feel safe in the school. Those spoken to say that bullying doesn't happen at the school but that if it did then staff would soon sort it out. Pupils are taught about a range of ways to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. A very large majority of the parents who responded to Parent View believe that staff ensure that their children are well looked after and safe.

Inspection findings

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the early years is a strength of the school. Good arrangements are in place to ensure a smooth transition from home and, once children start in the nursery class, adults make regular assessments of the progress that they are making. This information is used well and the activities which are planned for the children are stimulating and provide a good level of challenge. Children make good progress across the early years and an above-average proportion of children reached a good level of development in 2015 at the end of the Reception year. This means that the children were well prepared for the next stage of their education.
- The school has made significant improvements to the teaching of reading. The effective teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) in the early years and Year 1 is reflected in the results of the phonics check in 2015, which were above the national average. The high profile that has been given to reading is evident in the wide selection of books that are available to pupils and the high-quality displays in classrooms and shared areas across the school. Older pupils

read widely and often. Those spoken to during this inspection demonstrated a love of reading and a wide knowledge of different authors.

- The quality of writing across the school is also good. Pupils are provided with regular opportunities to write in English lessons and when studying other subjects such as science. They develop good skills and produce some highly imaginative work. Children get off to a solid start in the Nursery, where they are provided with regular opportunities to develop early writing skills. Across the school, children's successes in writing are celebrated in attractive displays of their work. Teachers mark the work that pupils produce in their English books carefully, and provide helpful feedback to pupils about how they can improve. Attainment in writing was significantly above the national average in 2015. The quality of handwriting, however, is not as good as it should be. The wide variety of pencil grips and handwriting styles seen across the school indicates that insufficient attention is paid to this key skill.
- Pupils' progress in mathematics is inconsistent across the school. In most year groups, pupils make good progress as teachers provide challenging work and good feedback, which helps pupils to move on in their learning. However, in some classes, pupils do not have enough opportunities to investigate and solve problems, and there are too many occasions when teachers fail to identify errors in pupils' work. Pupils' progress in these classes is slower as a result.
- Middle leaders make regular checks on the work in pupils' books. However, when making these checks they do not focus closely enough on the quality of learning or the progress that pupils are making. Consequently, the process does not help to identify strengths in teaching, learning and assessment, or areas that require improvement, such as the weak marking that was seen in some mathematics books.
- Across the school, pupils have very positive attitudes to learning and behave extremely well. As one pupil said to the inspector, 'We look after each other here'. Parents and members of staff agree that behaviour is a strength of the school. Pupils invariably try their best in lessons and support each other in their learning. In a Year 2 class, two pupils were working on spellings, challenging each other with some difficult words. When the inspector asked one of the pupils if he could spell chemist he replied, 'No, but I know how to spell pharmacy'. He proceeded to spell the word correctly!
- Older pupils enjoy the extra responsibilities that they are given through the school's 'buddy' system. Each Year 6 pupil is allocated a group of around eight younger pupils. They act as mentors for these pupils, look out for them during play times and organise games. Every second week they lead a small group assembly, during which pupils discuss a range of issues. This process helps to develop a strong sense of belonging to the school community.
- Senior leaders continue to stress the importance of regular attendance and follow up any absence promptly. Good attendance is celebrated and when a pupil's absence falls below 90% parents are invited into the school to discuss the impact of absence on academic progress. Despite these efforts, absence rates remain above the national average and there are too many pupils who are absent on a regular basis.

- Staff and parents are supportive of the school and the leadership team. All members of staff who responded to the staff questionnaire said that they are proud to work at the school. A very large majority of parents believe that the school is well led and managed and would recommend the school to a friend.
- Governance is highly effective. Governors visit the school often and are regularly involved in reviewing the quality of the school's work. They know about the relative strengths of teaching and learning across the school and understand the link between pay and performance. Governors ensure that all statutory duties are carried out, including those relating to safeguarding. They attend relevant training and provide good levels of challenge and support to school leaders. They share your ambition for the school to improve further.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the checks that middle leaders make on pupils' work are evaluative, and clearly identify strengths and areas for development
- all teachers follow the school's marking policy in mathematics and provide regular opportunities for pupils to use and apply their mathematical knowledge and skills to solve problems
- improvements are made to the quality of handwriting across the school
- attendance is improved so that it is at or above the national average.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Thurrock Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Tomkow

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection I met with you, the deputy headteacher and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. I also met with the chair of the governing body along with two other governors. I looked at work in pupils' books from across the school and visited each class with you or the deputy headteacher to observe teaching. I scrutinised documents relating to the school's safeguarding arrangements and looked at the single central record. I looked at the school's current self-evaluation document and the latest school improvement plan. I also looked at information about pupils' attendance. I considered the views of the 36 parents who had responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey. I also analysed the 16 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.