

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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Mrs Dawn Spiers
Headteacher
Marshbrook First School
Teddesley Road
Penkridge
Stafford
Staffordshire
ST19 5BA

Dear Mrs Spiers

Short inspection of Marshbrook First School

Following my visit to the school on 24 May 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 was judged to be good in December 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

There is no doubt that, under your leadership, the school has continued to improve and has the potential to achieve even greater successes. Already, the school has several notable strengths, specifically the quality of teaching and learning in the early years, the above-average academic standards reached by pupils, and the willingness of all staff to embrace change and continue to refine and improve their practice.

Since the previous inspection, the number of pupils at the school has increased considerably. In part, this is due to the creation of a school nursery but it is also because the school has grown in popularity. All the parents I spoke with, and the vast majority who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, expressed very complimentary views about the school. In particular, they praised the approachability of staff and the quality of teaching and care provided for their children. Parents, staff and pupils think that behaviour at the school is good and that lessons are interesting and taught well. Inspection evidence confirms this view.

In recent times, there has been some unavoidable staff absence and some of the key stage 2 pupils have been taught by temporary teachers. This has caused some disruption and variation in the quality of teaching. You have managed the situation well and ensured that the overall quality of teaching and learning has remained good. Nevertheless, these changes have restricted the speed of some aspects of school improvement. Long-term staff arrangements have now been confirmed and a new teacher is due to start in September 2016. When this happens, all classes will be taught by permanent teachers.

In April 2016, your school joined the newly created Penk Valley Federation of schools. The other schools in the federation are Wolgarston High School, Penkridge Middle School and Princefield First School. The headteacher of Wolgarston High School has taken on the role of federation principal. This new arrangement is helping to increase and broaden the range of expertise and opportunities available to staff and pupils. Indeed, the school leadership is now well placed to sharpen its focus on the details and key actions needed to lift standards even higher.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school site is very well maintained and all staff are alert to their duty of care for pupils. Staff and governors understand current safeguarding requirements and make sure that information about pupils is recorded properly and stored securely. Day-to-day safety routines, such as first aid care, checks on equipment and supervision at the beginning and end of the day and at playtimes, all operate with calm, organised efficiency. When school leaders have had reason to follow up any safeguarding concerns, they have done the right things at the right time. Accidents and playground bumps are noticed and recorded, and pupils report that while unkind or rough behaviour on the playground can happen sometimes, it is sorted out quickly and fairly. Pupils and parents who spoke with me described the school rules as fair and sensible, and behaviour as good. My evidence gathered during the inspection supports this view.

Inspection findings

- The school has continued to succeed because of good leadership. You bring optimism and good humour to your role. Your view of the school's current performance is informed, accurate and communicated clearly to all in the school community. Parents, staff and governors express confidence in your abilities and trust your judgement. You provide reassurance and calm words of wisdom in order to steer and support others, but also make requirements and non-negotiables understood, when necessary. Consequently, teachers, teaching assistants and volunteers do a good job. Pupils enjoy lessons, behave well and make good progress during their time at your school.
- Other key leaders, such as the assistant headteacher and subject leaders for English and mathematics, are capable, efficient and evaluative. They display a bright keenness, which shone out during their conversations with me. This same keenness is also evident in the informative reports they provide for leaders and governors, and in their classroom teaching.

- The majority of children start school with levels of knowledge and skill that are in line with or, in some cases, just below those typically expected for their age. They make excellent progress in the early years. In both the Nursery and Reception classes, the quality of teaching, range of activities, and the imagination and effort that go into the provision of resources are all superb. The benefits are clear to see. Children readily engage in learning, cooperate with others and respond with creative enthusiasm to the adults who teach and guide them. Communication between home and school is efficient and teamwork within the early years and with other school staff is strong. Adults are attentive to children's social, emotional and educational needs, and children are kept safe and productively occupied at all times. Not a moment is lost and children learn to love learning and enjoy school.
- My examination of test results and assessment data for the past three years shows that, by the end of key stage 1, pupils reached standards in reading, writing and mathematics that were consistently above average. Interestingly, while boys and girls have both done well academically, boys have tended to do particularly well and, by and large, this continues to be the case in most year groups. During this inspection, I tried to find out why this is so. My conversations with pupils, governors and staff, and my checks on the school's curriculum did not reveal any obvious reasons. The subjects on offer and the way these are taught hold equal appeal for boys and girls, and no one working or learning at the school has a definite understanding of what it is that is working so well for boys. However, it is clearly a success story.
- Another trend observed at the school is the fact that, year after year, pupils have reached higher standards in reading and writing than they have done in mathematics. This has been the case in key stage 1 and key stage 2. The school's assessment information for current pupils shows that mathematics standards are now rising and are more closely matched to those seen in English. There are a number of identifiable reasons for this. First, assessment in mathematics has improved. In the past, teachers' day-to-day assessment and record keeping focused quite heavily on recording the work pupils had covered rather than the skills they had acquired. This has now changed to focus on what pupils have actually understood and can do. This is helping to sharpen the precision of teaching in all classes, and is boosting progress and lifting standards. Second, the school timetable and the way pupils are grouped in mathematics lessons have been changed in order to make the best use of the available learning time. It is still early days, but these changes are raising standards. During this inspection, some very effective mathematics teaching was seen in both key stages. In fact, all the teaching seen during this inspection was confident, competent and held pupils' attention with explanations and activities that were pitched at just the right level. Work in pupils' books and on display, together with some expansive descriptions offered by pupils and parents, served to confirm that the 'snapshots' of effective teaching I saw were typical of the day-to-day practice in the school. Pupils of all abilities are doing well.

- In recent times, there has been some disruption to the consistency of teaching across the school owing to unavoidable staff absence. Leaders have been alert to the impact of this and have kept a close watch on the quality of teaching. They have managed changes of staff as well as possible and, consequently, pupils have continued to make good progress in all classes. Nevertheless, the variation in teaching has kept a cap on the pace of school improvement since the previous inspection. School leaders and staff have maintained and built further on the school's good performance, but have not yet managed to lift pupils' academic standards to where they could be, given the excellent start that children get in the early years. Now that long-term staffing arrangements have been confirmed, these variations are lessening.
- Pupils' behaviour is a notable strength. They show interest in their work and in one another. The pupils I spoke with in lessons, during playtimes and over the dining table were relaxed, confident, friendly and respectful. They readily engaged in conversation and had a lot of positive things to say about their school. In class and on the playground, pupils get along with others and are helpful and polite.
- Over time, pupils' attendance has been above average and pupils have rarely missed school without good reason. In 2015, however, absence rates rose to above average and there was a sudden spike in persistent absence. Attendance records for the current school year show that attendance rates are much improved and are almost back up to the levels seen in earlier years. However, a very small number of pupils continue to miss too much school, and this hinders their learning.
- The new working arrangement with the federation of schools is helping to widen the pool of expertise and provides a broader view of what can – and could – be achieved. Everyone involved with the leadership of the school has ambitions to raise its performance from good to outstanding. It is not there yet but, given the school's current position, it is a very realistic ambition that could be within reach in the not too distant future. Having said this, some aspects of the school's self-evaluation plan lack detailed evaluative analysis of what actually needs to be done to fine-tune teaching and learning so as to get the very best from everyone. The headlines are spot on; the details are not always apparent.
- Around the school, there are many attractive displays that showcase the breadth of the school curriculum and pupils' many successes. In all classes, pupils are proud of their achievements and eager to share their views about school life and lessons. Whether preparing for a cricket tournament, describing a recent school trip, designing a pneumatic robot or preparing 'meals' in a mud kitchen, pupils of all ages talk with excitement about their experiences at school. The school's extensive and well-maintained grounds are put to good use for sport, play and outdoor learning.

- Governance is effective. Governors are quick to ask questions and can talk about the work, culture and effectiveness of the school with informed authority and passion. They are proud of their school and ambitious for its future development. They gather information from a wide range of sources before they commit to making any decisions. They also take steps to make sure that money is spent wisely and in the best interests of the pupils at the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all pupils make the best possible progress in all classes in order to reach even higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics. They should do this by:
 - sharing and learning from the expertise and most effective practice across the newly created federation of schools
 - making sure that newly appointed staff get the necessary support and training so that they are able to realise the school's high expectations in their classroom practice
 - sharpening the detail within the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans
 - continuing to work with parents to improve the attendance of a small number of pupils who miss school for no good reason.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the assistant headteacher and other members of staff with leadership responsibilities. I carried out short observations of teaching and learning in all classes and looked at pupils' work in books and on display. I met with four governors, the principal of the federation and a representative of the local authority. I talked with pupils in lessons, on the playground and in the dining hall. In addition, I spoke with parents at the beginning of the school day.

By the end of the inspection, there were 35 recent responses and 24 written comments on Parent View. I took account of these and examined the findings from the school's own survey of parents' views. I looked at a number of documents, including pupils' progress information, the school's own evaluation of its performance, a review of the school's work completed by an educational consultant, school improvement plans, information about the work of the governing body and the federation, a report from the local authority and several school policy documents. I also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. I talked with members of staff about safeguarding matters.