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Mrs Julie Hills
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Dear Mrs Hills

Short inspection of St Mary's CofE Primary School, Amersham

Following my visit to the school on 30 June 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 September 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. In particular, you have strengthened leadership at all levels, including through the on-going development of the governing body. You have successfully developed senior leaders and subject leaders alongside enhancing opportunities for pupils to undertake leadership roles. For example, pupils run the active school council and undertake sports leadership, providing physical activities for other children at lunchtimes. As a consequence, pupils feel they have a significant stake in the success of their school. One pupil commented that he likes the school because it is 'democratic', and this means, 'everybody has a say'. The success and popularity of sport in school demonstrates how well your pupils collaborate and how pupils relish the opportunity to give of their best.

High standards and a strong religious ethos permeate your school. Under your determined leadership, pupils and staff alike are committed to making the school as good as it can be and removing any barriers that stand in pupils' way. For example, you have successfully worked alongside leaders to reduce gaps between the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and others. You have also ensured that pupils identified as at risk of underachievement receive the support they need to succeed. As result, targeted pupils now work in small 'nurture groups' for a time-limited period to develop their resilience and social skills. There is an orderly, caring and aspirational ethos throughout the school. This is typified by the way pupils work in self-imposed quiet when completing

the tasks they are set, often accompanied by specially chosen music to aid them in their endeavours. Outcomes in 2015 were strong, except for pupils' progress in writing. In 2016, as a result of the well-focused changes you have made, most areas are set to improve, especially writing.

The areas for development identified in the previous inspection report are now much improved. Subject leaders, including those new in post, make a substantial contribution to moving the school forward. For example, the English subject leader has rigorously reviewed the impact of new approaches to teaching writing and suggested further refinements. These refinements include developing the way pupils employ sophisticated vocabulary and use their grammar knowledge. You agree that there is more work needed to ensure that pupils' spelling is accurate. The English subject leader has well-focused plans in place to achieve this. Leaders have also effectively developed the school's own unique approach to assessment without levels. Of particular note is the way that your leaders carefully researched different approaches before deciding on the best one for your pupils. As the approach is unique to your school, you have implemented it systematically and carefully. You have taken time to train parents, pupils and teachers so they feel confident in the new approach. However, as a result, some teachers, including in the early years setting, have missed opportunities to set pupils tasks that will enable them to exceed age-related expectations. In order to do this, pupils need the chance to apply their skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts.

Governance is strong. In order to make their contributions as good as they can be, governors have evaluated the impact of their work on the school's development. To ensure this process was sufficiently rigorous, the governing body commissioned a review of governance last year. Governors acted promptly on the recommendations from this and made changes that have strengthened governance further. In particular, a committee of governors works closely with subject leaders to monitor strengths and weaknesses in teaching. They recognise that last year there was upheaval due to some staffing issues, and did everything in their power to mitigate its effect.

You have worked well with your stakeholders, including the local authority. You have benefited from support provided by the diocese. As a local leader of education, you in turn have supported local schools. You and the governors have sought to improve links with parents. To this end, governors have made themselves available in the playground, before and after school. The responses on Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire) indicated that 95% would recommend the school. The vast majority of comments on free text were glowing and highlighted the way the school cares for its pupils. One parent commented, 'The school has created a relaxed and nurturing atmosphere where children feel welcomed and are encouraged to learn and explore'. Other comments were in a similar vein. A number of parents, however, expressed concerns relating to the turbulence in staffing last year, which is now resolved.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. The headteacher is the designated safeguarding lead and has ensured that there is an unremitting and effective emphasis on safeguarding. There are well-thought-out contingency plans in place for when she is unavailable. These include nominated local headteachers, with relevant expertise on stand-by, should a need arise. The designated lead has made timely referrals to the authority's welfare officers when the need has arisen, and assiduously monitors the way these referrals are dealt with. Where necessary, she attentively makes follow-up calls to external agencies to receive assurances that appropriate actions have been taken.

There is a high degree of vigilance in all areas of safeguarding. Actions taken in response to the school's proximity to a busy road, such as road safety courses for pupils, are indicative of this. Of note is the way the headteacher accurately records the safeguarding training staff have received and ensures all staff are up-to-date with requirements. In order to do this she has used her well-established links to arrange for staff who have missed training to attend sessions at local schools.

Inspection findings

- Leaders, governors and staff have established an aspirational, orderly and nurturing ethos. Effective additional support, provided through the 'nurture group', ensures targeted pupils receive the assistance they need to surmount any barriers.
- Leaders have successfully improved the attendance of the small numbers of disadvantaged pupils. Gaps have significantly narrowed between their attendance and that of others.
- Leaders and governors ensure pupils make a very positive contribution to school life. In so doing, pupils gain valuable leadership and social skills. Pupils lead assemblies, cooperate well with each other as members of sports teams, and maturely represent their classmates' views in the school council.
- Leaders ensure that pupils adhere to their very high standards of conduct. There is a strong work ethic throughout the school, which is encouraged and celebrated. For example, pupils receive regular certificates to celebrate their writing achievements. During the inspection, pupils displayed very positive attitudes to learning. Consequently, a very high percentage of pupils are set to reach age-related expectations in key stages 1 and 2 this year.
- Leaders and governors identify strengths and weaknesses precisely, making good use of information on pupils' achievement to do this. They insist that necessary improvements are carefully considered and far-reaching. Governors have made good use of their expertise to support and challenge subject leaders so that the approaches they introduce improve pupils' outcomes.
- The areas identified as needing development following the previous inspection have been very effectively tackled. Subject leaders now make

a deep and powerful contribution to the school. They have expertise and knowledge in the subjects they lead, which include humanities, science and computing. They use this to good effect when guiding teachers and giving feedback to them on the quality of their teaching.

- Successful new approaches to teaching have been introduced by the English and mathematics leaders. These have led to improved outcomes. In 2016 key stage 1 assessments, above one third of pupils are set to exceed age-related expectations in reading and mathematics. In Year 6, almost half of pupils are predicted to exceed age-related expectations in mathematics and reading tests.
- Since joining the school in September 2015, the English subject leader has worked successfully with teachers to refine their approaches to the teaching of writing. As a consequence, pupils now use highly sophisticated vocabulary in a nuanced way. This is leading to much better progress in writing, following a period of weaker progress. However, pupils' spelling, including the spelling of commonly used words, is not as strong as it should be. There are well-focused plans in place to improve this.
- In mathematics, the subject leader has effectively supported teachers and teaching assistants so they make better use of pupils' misconceptions. This was noticeable when teaching assistants supported small groups of pupils. In both key stages, pupils are provided with opportunities to enhance their problem solving skills.
- Leaders have developed a highly bespoke approach to assessing pupils' work without levels. The approach has been developed in a considered way over time. It sensibly places emphasis on pupils applying their skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts. However, some teachers, including in early years, do not regularly set tasks with enough challenge and flexibility to enable pupils, especially the most able, to do this.
- Governance has evolved and is very effective. This is because the governing body has wisely used experts to help them review and evaluate their contribution to the school's development. Good use has been made of governors' individual expertise in implementing recommendations from the review of governance. For example, a governor has closely reviewed the English subject leader's planned approaches to improving writing.
- The headteacher has high levels of approval from staff and the vast majority of parents. Of particular note are the very positive comments made by very many parents on the free text facility in Parent View. The following comment provides a flavour: 'The staff are dedicated and constantly amaze us with the effort they go to give the children a thoroughly enjoyable learning experience'. However, some parents who were less positive expressed concerns about the impact of turbulence in staffing from the previous year. This situation is now resolved. In order for parents to gain a better understanding of the governing body's function, governors are available and visible when parents drop off and collect their children.
- The headteacher is a local leader of education and has well-established

links with local schools. She has used these to good effect to support her in ensuring all safeguarding procedures and requirements are duly implemented.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- well-focused plans to improve spelling are fully implemented
- teachers, including those in early years, set tasks that are flexible and demanding enough for pupils, especially the most able, to apply their knowledge and skills in a range of contexts and reach their potential.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Oxford and the director of children's services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Her Majesty's Inspector met with you and the deputy headteacher, as well as subject and year group leaders, members of the governing body (including the chair), a group of pupils and a representative from the local authority. Short visits were made to a number of lessons, most of which were accompanied by a member of the senior leadership team, to observe teaching and look at work in pupils' books. She also visited the nurture group, observed pupils' behaviour in a range of situations, including in lessons, around school and going into assembly. The 96 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), one letter sent by a parent to inspectors, and 54 comments that parents made on free text were also considered. Her Majesty's Inspector also considered 29 responses to the staff questionnaire and analysed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the latest improvement plan, information about pupils' progress and safeguarding documentation.