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Dear Mrs Brewer

Short inspection of Swallowfield Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 13 September 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. A comment received from a parent completing Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) typifies why Swallowfield is a good school: 'Swallowfield is a really caring school with fantastic teachers and support staff. We feel that the school provides a strong platform for academic achievement as well as a positive nurturing environment for children's emotional and social well-being.' The large majority of the 90 parents who completed the questionnaire and all the parents that I spoke to during the day reinforced the positive message conveyed in this statement.

Staff, parents, governors and, especially, the pupils are proud to belong to this school community. Teachers and support staff thrive professionally through access to the high-quality training and development provided in school and externally. You actively encourage them to take further qualifications and you are astute in recognising the right time to develop your staff as future leaders. This contributes to the consistently good or better teaching from which all pupils benefit on a daily basis. Teamwork is strong; morale is high and staff turnover is low.

Your ambition for all pupils to achieve well, enjoy school and participate in interesting, memorable activities comes across convincingly and is shared by all leaders and staff. There is extensive enrichment available in the curriculum. English and mathematics have their appropriate place as top priorities, but not at the

expense of other subjects. Pupils' skills are advanced in using technologies such as computers, iPads and digital cameras to support their learning. They have access to high-quality resources coupled with good teaching to develop their skills. Governors have invested heavily in the school's infrastructure, recognising the benefit to pupils in their future lives and that of teachers who use technology proficiently in their teaching to promote good learning. Pupils also excel in sport and physical education because the government's sport premium grant is used effectively to increase participation rates, extend the range of sports on offer and provide specialist coaching for staff and pupils. Where the school has invested in facilities and resources, the difference they will make to pupils' learning is always the priority.

Leaders and governors have addressed improvements identified in the previous inspection successfully.

- The school has gained the national diversity award and you have forged strong links with communities in other countries. Fundamental British values are promoted strongly and woven into all aspects of the curriculum. As a result of this, pupils have a good understanding of the diversity of faith, cultures and backgrounds existing in our society.
- Teachers use assessment well to inform pupils' next steps in learning so that they all make good progress.

All groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the most able pupils, make good progress from their starting points. Staff keep useful, accurate records of how well children are learning from the youngest two-year-olds in Busy Bees to the end of Year 4, when pupils transfer to middle school. Teachers use these records to check that pupils are learning well, at the right level of difficulty. If pupils are falling behind, the right steps are taken to give them some extra help to catch up.

Children in the early years have made better progress in the past two years than previously. You are strengthening links between the Busy Bees pre-school staff and those in the Reception classes to improve continuity and progression in children's learning. There is still work to do to further increase the proportion of pupils reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception in readiness to start Year 1.

Pupils in key stage 1 make good progress in reading. They are able to blend sounds in order all through a word to read it. The very large majority of pupils reach the expected standard in phonics by the end of Year 2. Attainment in reading, writing and mathematics is above average by the end of Year 2, including for disadvantaged pupils who are eligible for additional funding known as the pupil premium. The most able pupils do well across the board, including the most able who are also disadvantaged. By the end of Year 4, pupils are well prepared for the transition to middle school. They are particularly proficient in reading, which the school recognises as a key to future academic success in all subjects and which features strongly across the curriculum. The library bus (a real double-decker bus situated in the playground) provides rich resources for pupils in terms of books and is a lovely place for them to read, browse and develop a love of reading. Many pupils produce sophisticated, good-quality writing, as seen in their written work.

Another reason why pupils thrive academically in this school is because you and your staff know them well as individuals and you all provide good-quality care, guidance and support for them. Parents that I spoke to felt strongly that the school is effective in its response to adapting its provision to suit the individual needs of pupils, whether they be learning, social, emotional or physical needs. This increases pupils' confidence and helps them to overcome difficulties that they may encounter. For example, the school has a good track record in supporting and settling in children who are looked after by the local authority, so that they feel secure and make good progress quickly. Pupils' good personal development is promoted well through good teaching and care. Pupils' attendance is above average and the school has not excluded any pupils in its recent history.

You provide strong and visionary leadership. Leaders and governors know the school well and self-evaluation is accurate. Governors visit regularly to monitor the school's work and check out your judgements. Even so, your written evaluation, while consistently providing secure evidence to back up your judgements, does not explicitly highlight what could be even better to take the school forward. There is not a strong link between the self-evaluation and the chosen priorities for future improvement in the school's plans. These important documents in their current format are not useful enough as tools for staff and governors to drive improvements forward more quickly. In addition, some policies and other information on the school's website are not up to date. Nonetheless, Swallowfield Lower School is in safe hands to make continuous improvement. You, other leaders and governors are reflective practitioners and respond positively to rigorous scrutiny of the school's work undertaken by professionals who are external to the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders and governors ensure that safeguarding is a priority and that everyone plays their part in keeping children safe. A strong culture of shared responsibility permeates all aspects of the school's work. Teaching and non-teaching staff are regularly trained in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. This means that they are in a strong position to identify potentially vulnerable pupils and decide when interventions or referrals are needed. As the designated lead professional for safeguarding, you keep them up to date with the latest guidance from the Department for Education. The new academic year is in its infancy and the safeguarding policy has not yet been updated to reflect the latest September 2016 guidance. Leaders and governors are aware of this and are making revision of the existing policy a priority. Leaders and governors have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. This enables referrals to external agencies to be made quickly and efficiently. Statutory checks made on all staff, governors, regular volunteers and contractors are thorough to ensure their suitability to work with children. Risks associated with individual pupils' medical needs, such as allergies, are considered carefully and shared with all staff in the best interests of pupils who have complex medical conditions.

Inspection findings

- Provision in the early years, both inside and outdoors, promotes children's learning well as they choose from a wide range of activities and attractive resources. Impressively, given that some children were in their first week of starting school, they all showed a high level of concentration and engagement. All children were supported well by staff who promoted children's talk and social skills.
- Stronger links have been developed between Busy Bees provision and Reception classes to improve provision, and this is leading to children making better progress from their starting points, including children who are disadvantaged, children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who are the most able. Improvement is evident in the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception. Outcomes are below the national average, but rising. The local authority has endorsed the school's assessment of children's development as accurate.
- Parental satisfaction is strong. The proportion of the 90 parents responding to Parent View who would recommend the school to other parents is high at 93%. The school seeks the views of parents regularly through surveys and questionnaires. Several parents commented that 'teachers are responsive, they listen and make changes to ensure my child is happy'. Parents receive valuable information about what their children will be learning and how they can help them at home.
- All documentation for safeguarding is well kept and detailed, including records of pupils referred to external health or education services or children's services. Recruitment procedures meet requirements and staff files are kept in good order with the relevant paperwork and references in place. Training for staff is regular and up to date. The school's current safeguarding policy has not yet been updated to reflect the most recent September 2016 guidance.
- The school has successfully maintained and promoted pupils' good personal development, behaviour and welfare. Attendance is above average for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils. When attendance slips for any reason, you take action quickly to support families and regain regular attendance. No exclusions have been made in the school's recent history. Pupils show interest in their learning; they are earnest in their approach and are confident to ask questions.
- Pupils work together cooperatively and have good skills in negotiating when working in groups. This is because they have plenty of opportunities to work in this way, as well as in pairs and individually. I visited every class with you, the assistant headteacher or the senior teacher and we all agreed that the teaching we saw promoted good learning and personal development.
- Disadvantaged pupils do well, making good progress from their starting points, including those who are the most able. The pupil premium funding is used effectively in the early years and in key stages 1 and 2. Leaders and governors check that the chosen extra provision to help them to catch up or to access additional activities makes a difference to their learning. All staff know who the disadvantaged pupils are and leaders and governors rightly show this group as a priority in its plans for future improvement.

- Pupils achieve well in key stages 1 and 2, not only in reading, writing and mathematics, but in most other subjects as well. Literacy is strongly promoted across the curriculum. In particular, pupils excel in reading. Phonics is taught systematically from the early years onwards, so pupils are able to break down words into smaller sounds to read them or build them up to spell them. I listened to nine of the most able readers from years 3 and 4 reading aloud. All of them were fluent and expressive readers. They read widely and often and were able to discuss what they were reading eloquently.
- Leaders at all levels are effective. They check the quality of teaching and learning regularly and make accurate judgements about what is working well and where improvements are needed. Your presence in and around the school puts you in prime position to know what is happening in classrooms on a daily basis. Your finger is securely on the pulse of teaching and learning. However, written evaluation focuses entirely on strengths and does not provide a clear enough rationale for why actions are chosen for the school's improvement plan. The school improvement plan is not useful in its current format as a tool for governors to use to check that progress is being made within the expected timescale. It is unclear who is responsible for leading each action, who will check and evaluate its success and when and how this will be done.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception continues to rise to above average
- self-evaluation highlights strengths in teaching and learning, as well as weaknesses, and this forms the basis of plans for future improvement
- the school's website holds up-to-date information and that policies are updated quickly in the light of new requirements and guidance.

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

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- During the inspection I met with all senior leaders, early years leaders, two governors and subject leaders for computing, physical education and art and design. I looked at a range of data about pupils' achievement, documents, records and policies including those relating to safeguarding.
- I took into account results from 90 parents' responses in Parent View and those provided by 18 staff in the staff questionnaire. I also spoke directly with seven parents who were attending a Year 4 parents' meeting.
- Together with you, the assistant headteacher or the senior teacher, I visited all classes to observe teaching and learning in a range of subjects and, in addition, the teaching of phonics in key stage 1.
- With the Year 4 teacher, you and the senior teacher, I looked at a sample of English, mathematics and topic work from last year's Year 4 pupils. I also listened to nine of the most able pupils in Years 3 and 4 reading and talked to many more pupils generally during the day.
- The key lines of enquiry that I identified to look at in more depth during this inspection included: teaching and learning in the early years, pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, the effectiveness of safeguarding, the achievement of disadvantaged pupils including the most able, and how well pupils are prepared for transfer to middle school.