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Mrs Cheryl Chalkley
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Dear Mrs Chalkley

Short inspection of Mersham Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 22 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 June 2012.

This school continues to be good.

School leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since taking up your appointment in September 2015, you have worked with total resolve to arrest declining standards. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning has improved rapidly and pupils are now making much better progress than in the recent past.

You have not avoided making the difficult decisions that have been instrumental in bringing about change. A restructuring of the school's leadership model has facilitated the recent introduction of a new deputy headteacher role. Other changes, including those in the deployment of teaching and support staff, have had a good impact on raising standards, especially in key stage 2.

Your working partnership with the governing body is strong. Governors, many of them experienced in governance but relatively new to the school, have supported and challenged you well. They understand the importance of maintaining a strategic overview without becoming embroiled in the day-to-day leadership of the school. This has allowed you to focus your energies successfully on establishing the right priorities and determining the key actions to bring about the required improvement.

Our visits to classrooms were useful and allowed me to see first-hand the impact of your drive to raise standards. Pupils were keen to show me their work and tell me how much they enjoy coming to school. There was a real sense of engagement with

learning in all classrooms, including in the Reception class, where children were enjoying a wide range of activities helping them to develop their early number skills. Expectations were high, particularly in upper key stage 2, where pupils were being encouraged to introduce sophisticated language into their writing to make it more interesting. Pupils in Year 3 explained how staff try to ensure that they work hard by adding extra challenge, 'even when it was pretty hard in the first place'.

Pupils told me they feel safe at school. During playtime, a group of girls from Year 5 explained the playground rules and insisted that people are not 'mean' to each other at Mersham. When I asked pupils what they would do to improve the school, they struggled to find anything, insisting, 'we like it as it is'. They also asserted there was no bullying at the school, although there had been in the past.

During the inspection, behaviour was very good – especially in classrooms, where pupils were totally engaged with their learning. During my formal meeting with pupils, some talked about disruption to their learning in the past, but said that staff had always dealt with problems well. A small minority of parents who used the online questionnaire, Parent View, expressed concern about behaviour. However, the very large majority agreed that staff ensure that pupils are well behaved.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors recognised the many strengths of the school, including attainment being above average at the end of key stage 2, teachers having high expectations, and pupils behaving well and having good attitudes to their work. They also identified a need to ensure that teachers always checked progress in order to identify next steps in learning, and that there was the right level of challenge for pupils across the school. Leaders have addressed these matters effectively so that:

- teachers have a good knowledge and understanding of the progress pupils make during lessons and over time
- teachers plan and deliver engaging lessons which provide appropriate levels of challenge for most pupils most of the time.

Since the last inspection, school leaders have continued the important process of self-evaluation in order to identify the most important priorities to improve the school. During my visit, you were able to explain the school's strengths, as well as the areas that need to be developed. These include ensuring that teachers are more consistent in the levels of challenge they offer most-able pupils. We also agreed that outcomes for boys need to improve in the Reception Year so that they more closely match those excellent outcomes seen for girls.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders and governors ensure that the safety of children is the school's top priority. Day-to-day routines are given high importance. Procedures and systems are robust, including the security of the school site and checks on visitors. Staff and governor training is commensurate with their different levels of responsibility within the school. Policies to keep children safe are fit for purpose and implemented well.

The wider curriculum offers pupils opportunities to complete projects on topics such

as road safety, as well as learning about how to stay safe when using the internet. Pupils are also aware of the potential dangers associated with social media. Pupils and staff feel safe within school. In the Parent View survey, a minority of parents expressed concerns about safety and behaviour. However, the vast majority of parents were positive about this aspect of the school's work.

Inspection findings

- You lead the school well and have wasted no time in confirming the school's strengths and acting on the aspects that need to be better. Because of this, the quality of teaching and the impact it has on the progress of pupils has improved rapidly. Consequently, the decline in standards seen in the recent past has been reversed.
- Changes to the structure of the leadership team are already having a positive effect on improving the quality of provision across the school. The support of a local leader of education, brokered by the local authority, has been fundamental in improving the effectiveness and capacity of leadership at all levels.
- The introduction of pupil progress meetings with a clear focus on the gains made by disadvantaged groups and the most able pupils has ensured that staff are much clearer about school leaders' expectations. This single initiative has had a significant part to play in arresting declining standards for all pupils in the school, not just those of different groups.
- Governors know the school very well and offer you excellent support in making the changes required to improve the school. They are aware that their role is strategic in nature and are very clear that their focus should be on holding leaders to account for improvement, not the day-to-day running of the school.
- The new system to measure pupils' progress and attainment is developing well. Collaboration with other local schools has allowed you to refine the way teachers use it in order to track pupils' progress and plan next steps in learning.
- Children in the early years generally make good progress. However, last year the proportion of boys achieving a good level of development was not as high as that of girls. School leaders should make this a priority to ensure this imbalance is addressed as quickly as possible.
- In recent years, levels of attainment and rates of progress of pupils in key stage 2 have been in decline when compared to other schools nationally. The performance of boys in particular has also been a cause for concern. However, the school's own pupil progress information and initial unvalidated national test and assessment information indicate that school leaders have reversed this trend in 2016, with the performance of boys in particular having improved dramatically.
- Pupils of all abilities clearly understand the importance of reading. Most-able readers read with fluency and enjoy showing off their reading skills. Least-able readers are less comfortable when asked to read aloud, but use a range of skills to successfully negotiate their chosen texts.
- Most pupils behave very well and show excellent attitudes to learning, although the actions of some pupils have led to disruption in the past. However, staff deal well with the few pupils who have complex needs, in order to curtail the impact of their actions. Tellingly, pupils are very positive about the way staff deal with

behaviour and told the inspector that disruptions to learning are now minimal.

- Attendance rates are good, with persistent absence much lower than national averages. Children enjoy coming to school because, as they said during the inspection, 'we learn lots due to staff pushing us in every subject'.
- The involvement of the local authority has been instrumental in ensuring the recent decline in standards has been reversed. Support for school leaders and governors has been particularly useful, including support and advice to ensure pupils behave well and are safe in school.
- Most parents are very supportive of the school. All of the parents who spoke to the inspector and the very large majority of those who responded to Parent View were very positive about the quality of education the school offers.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the current focus on the progress that most-able pupils make is sustained, so that an increasing number attain at the higher standards they are capable of
- the proportion of boys achieving a good level of development by the end of the early years increases, so it more closely matches that of girls.

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

Yours sincerely

Clive Close

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Throughout the inspection I focused on the safety and behaviour of pupils, as well as paying particular attention to the progress and achievements of different groups of pupils, including those of boys, disadvantaged pupils, and the most able. During the inspection I met with you and your deputy, non-teaching support staff, a representative group of pupils, and the vice-chair of the governing body, accompanied by four other governors. I also met with a representative of the local authority. You accompanied me as I visited every year group, talking to pupils about their learning and looking at the quality of their work. I also observed pupils' behaviour in the playground and as they moved around the school. I listened to a number of pupils read. I talked to parents at the beginning of the day and took into account the 62 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I analysed a wide range of documentation, including information about the progress and achievements of pupils, your own school self-evaluation, the school improvement plan, minutes of the meetings of the governing body and records of visits by the local authority. The safeguarding policy, single central record of staff checks and other policies, records and procedures to keep pupils safe were also scrutinised.