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Ms Christine Branscombe
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Dear Ms Branscombe

Short inspection of Appletree Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 16 November 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 outstanding in November 2012. The school was also judged outstanding at an inspection in January 2010. The on-site children's centre, which is fully integrated within the school and managed by school leaders, was judged outstanding in June 2013.

You took up your post as headteacher in September 2016.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and the previous headteacher have made sure that the school continues to flourish. Appletree remains a school where individual children's needs are met extremely well. Those children who need to catch up in their learning do so quickly. This is because the school continues to assist children to develop rapidly and be ready for learning. Staff help children to be able to communicate, listen and coordinate their movements with confidence. Children excel in their learning across different subjects. They are happy and love attending nursery school.

The classrooms and outdoor areas continue to be inspiring spaces for learning. Staff and leaders expect much of themselves in creating exciting opportunities for children to play and explore. Accomplished teamwork between staff and exceptional leadership remain at the heart of the school's success.

At the previous inspection, the inspector asked the school to provide more opportunities for children to learn about the sounds that letters represent. This has been achieved fully through lots of opportunities for staff to develop their knowledge, as well as close checks by leaders on the quality of teaching. Staff make extensive use of group times and any spontaneous opportunities to teach children rhymes, songs and letter sounds. High-quality fiction and non-fiction books and opportunities to write are provided and used frequently by children and staff to extend learning across subjects.

A key strength of the school is the wide-ranging support for disadvantaged children. While children's individual needs have always been supported effectively, staff and leaders are now highly focused upon helping disadvantaged pupils to make even greater progress in their learning. For example, since the previous inspection, the school has extended provision to include funded two-year-olds. This part of the school is now giving the very youngest disadvantaged children an excellent start to their learning.

Staff and leaders record, celebrate and review the progress of children at the school in great detail. However, the summary information gathered is hugely complex. Leaders recognise that further work is needed to make sure that they have enough easily accessible and understandable information. Nevertheless, information does continue to show that children make excellent progress during the short time they attend the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Arrangements to protect children, staff and families are coordinated meticulously and are fit for purpose. Members of the leadership team each play a key role in the oversight of arrangements for safeguarding. There is a high level of training for the designated lead and deputy leaders for safeguarding. Staff always have expert colleagues on hand if they need advice. There are many opportunities to learn from the skills and training of school and children's centre colleagues. Leaders give excellent support to staff through well-developed systems of supervision sessions to review and improve their work. Safeguarding records kept by the school are detailed, of high quality and used extremely well to assist links with other professionals in support of families. Training for staff about safeguarding is frequent and thorough. Staff understand risks to children and families, including domestic violence, female genital mutilation and the dangers of exposure to extremist views. They know how to refer any concerns about children or adults. Staff act quickly to provide and coordinate early help for families who require support. This means that the school reduces the burden upon parents of repeating an explanation of their child's needs to other services when different professionals come together to advise and assist parents.

Inspection findings

- Over several years, leaders have worked extremely successfully to provide education, care and healthcare services for children and families that link together closely and are accessible within one building. In your short time in post, you have made sure that there remains an unmistakably clear vision of giving parents and children high-quality opportunities to learn and develop. Parents told me that the school and the children's centre work together exceptionally well to make sure that children and adults are very well supported.
- Without exception, there is considerable attention shown in developing relationships with children and their families at the school. This extends to the quality of resources, outdoor areas, classrooms, displays and planned learning. The school makes sure that everything staff do is on the basis of very careful thought and consideration.
- The individual skills of teachers and teaching assistants are used fully to continue the development and improvement of the school. Training and support for staff are first rate and help staff to learn from one another as well as from highly developed practice elsewhere.
- Teamwork among staff is very strong. Staff in the school have an excellent understanding of how young children develop and learn in the early years. They use this knowledge very thoughtfully to improve their work with children. Over time, teaching in the school is highly skilful and adapted precisely to the needs of different children. Because of these strengths, staff new to the school are developing as highly skilled additions to the staff team.
- Arrangements for the leadership of the school benefit immensely from the contribution of the deputy headteacher and the senior teacher. Their different and yet complementary expertise adds strength to the work of the school. They give an accomplished steer to the work of staff during the half of the week that you work at the other federated school where you are also headteacher.
- You have brought fresh challenge and perceptive insight to the work of the school. You have been quick to spot where work is excellent as well as what can be developed even further. You listen closely to the views of staff, governors and the local authority. You have a very clear understanding of the important challenges the school faces, such as amendments to school funding, staff hours of work and the take-up of nursery places. This gives reassurance that the next stage of the school's life is being considered very carefully by you and your team.
- The exceptionally high quality of the school has been extended to include new provision for two-year-olds. The new classroom is led and managed very successfully. Staff working with two-year-olds are highly skilled and knowledgeable about supporting the care and learning needs of very young children. Excellent teaching is giving two-year-olds a very successful start to their education. They are rapidly developing much-needed physical skills, social and emotional confidence and their ability to listen and communicate. Most-able disadvantaged two-year-olds benefit greatly from the extra challenge of regularly joining group times with three- and four-year-olds in the older class.

- Staff excel at learning quickly about children's needs when children first start at nursery school. They learn about children's individual lives and gain an excellent understanding of the obstacles that children are experiencing in their development and learning. This knowledge is not limited to a child's key person; the whole team make sure that they get to know each child in great detail. Teaching is then adapted fully to children's individual needs. This helps disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds to benefit hugely from planned activities. School information shows very clearly that the difference between these children and others is narrow.
- Most-able disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds are thriving at school because staff hold such high expectations of what children can achieve. Teaching draws upon staff's highly informed knowledge of how to prompt children to think through questions they are asked. For example, most-able children drawing shapes with the teacher were excited to be naming semi-circles and hexagons correctly. Because you want to see even more enthusiasm and understanding of mathematics, you have made it a current school priority.
- School information shows the huge steps forward made by different groups of children while attending the school. Nonetheless, you have spotted that it is not always easy to draw out the precise information you need. For example, you have found that the progress made by children during their final term at school cannot be identified easily. You have rightly made improving these systems a priority for improvement.
- During the inspection, parents expressed overwhelming support for the work of the school. They are very pleased with the high quality of staff-child and staff-parent relationships. They are delighted with the school's stimulating outdoor areas. They praise the vibrant classrooms and corridors, where they see positive celebration of their children's learning and key messages about safety and healthy living. A recent school focus on helping parents to understand what to expect of young children at different ages is raising parents' knowledge of how they can support their children at home.
- Case studies and comments from several parents indicate unreservedly that Appletree is a school that is always prepared to go as far as necessary to support individual children and families. Such significant support for individual children is resulting in children overcoming big obstacles to their success. As a result, children throughout the school are flourishing in their development and learning.
- Children leave Appletree ready for continuing their learning at primary school. Your focus on children's communication and language skills as much as their literacy skills is bringing much benefit. Children show a good understanding of rhymes, songs and letter sounds and they want to write. They love books. For example, during the inspection, skilful support for disadvantaged boys to use a wide range of fiction and non-fiction books about trains extended their play and learning about a topic that fascinates them.

- You identified that updating the school's website to meet government requirements on the publication of information was proving too complex and costly for the school. You have taken prompt action and a new, up-to-date website is almost ready for publication. You plan to include information currently missing about your pupil premium strategy, as well as your most recent complaints policy and child protection policy.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- information about the progress of groups of children is easy to understand and includes a full picture of what children achieve during their final term at nursery school.

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

Yours sincerely

Tim Vaughan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and other leaders to discuss your views of the school, your work to sustain existing strengths and your plans for the future. I met with a representative of Lancashire local authority to consider its evaluation of the school. I met with three members of the governing body, including the chair. Throughout the inspection I spoke with a range of parents about their experience of the school. You and I observed teaching and learning in both classrooms and outdoors, including children reading and staff working with most-able children. We looked at the school admissions register, attendance register and records of checks on the suitability of staff to work with children. I looked at school information about the progress of different groups of children as well as examples of children's 'learning journey' records.

To review whether the school remains outstanding, I considered how well the school has improved the teaching of literacy, including phonics. I explored how successfully the school is supporting disadvantaged children, including funded two-year-olds. I looked at what steps you have taken as the new headteacher to continue the improvement of the school. In addition, I looked closely at the effectiveness of safeguarding, including the benefit to children and families of links between the school and the on-site children's centre.