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5 December 2016

Mrs Suzanne Summerhayes
Interim Headteacher
Ashwell Primary School
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Dear Mrs Summerhayes

Short inspection of Ashwell Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 10 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 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 previous inspection. Almost all parents who completed the Ofsted questionnaire, Parent View, were positive about the school and would recommend it to others. I received a large number of positive additional comments and agree with parents who wrote that:

- the school allows their children to flourish
- the many extra-curricular activities help to raise achievement
- provision in the early years is vibrant
- the staff are very dedicated and go above and beyond what is required
- pupils make good progress and enjoy going to school every day
- the support for pupils who face difficulties in their lives is very good.

As interim headteacher for this term, you are managing the transition in leadership effectively. You communicate frequently with the substantive headteacher who will lead the school from January 2017. During this inspection, I observed the school's work with the substantive headteacher and it was clear that he knows what to do to improve the school further. The staff feel energised and are working well as a team. Last year, the school faced some financial difficulties and challenging decisions were taken to reorganise staffing and classes. The departure of the headteacher added to the staff's concerns. Teachers say that morale is now better and they are looking forward to a successful academic year.

Despite praising the teachers for the quality of their work, some parents are worried about the learning in the large Year 3 class and in the mixed-age classes. You are monitoring this carefully. Year 6 pupils told me that they like the booster classes specifically held for them on Fridays. I observed the learning in the large Year 3 class and checked pupils' books. I saw that pupils were working well with an experienced teacher and two additional adults. You are reviewing pupils' progress in all classes and must now ensure that effective communication with parents is maintained.

The school is open to external advice. Teachers access good training and reflect on their practice. Training has been lacking in the recent past and, as a result, the quality of teaching in mathematics is not good enough yet. Although many pupils did well in the 2016 tests, progress in mathematics for pupils of average ability is too slow at key stage 2. With the subject leader, you are taking effective action to improve the quality of teaching but it is too early to see the full impact of your work on the progress of all groups of pupils. The support of the local authority's improvement and achievement service (Herts for Learning), for mathematics and English in particular, is invaluable. Teachers and teaching assistants return from training events enthused. The purchase of a wider range of resources is helping current pupils do better. Additional provision is in place to ensure that pupils in Year 6 achieve as highly in mathematics as they do in their other subjects.

In reading and writing, pupils do well. Reading is given a high profile and pupils are confident readers. From a very young age, pupils apply themselves well to their writing. In the early years, girls were very keen to explain how they could spot the name of their friends on the clipboard. Boys were thrilled to use the giant electronic devices. The early years leader, although new to the post, has improved provision significantly, particularly the outdoor area. The expertise of the Herts for Learning adviser is highly beneficial and, with the teaching assistants, they form a cohesive team.

Pupils do well in many other subjects and by the end of Year 6 they are well prepared to move to their secondary school. The work on display for art is of high quality. Pupils love sport and physical education. I observed an after-school netball club and saw how dynamic and enthusiastic pupils were, encouraged by highly supportive adults. Children in Reception listened to instructions very carefully on how to make full use of space in the large hall to show how to be a firework. Pupils also said that they like music and science. The most able pupils are doing well and have many opportunities to apply their skills in more challenging contexts such as learning a foreign language, the science week, the 'take one picture' art day and the mathematics challenge with other schools.

The inclusion coordinator tracks the progress of pupils who have additional learning, welfare or emotional needs very carefully. Promoting pupils' personal development is a strength of the school. The positive relationships between adults and pupils encourage those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities to develop their confidence. As a result, they access all areas of the curriculum, persevere and learn well.

You have addressed the areas for development from the previous inspection successfully. Teachers are assessing pupils carefully and are helping them improve their work. Although several subject leaders are new this term, they know what to do to monitor their areas of responsibility.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff are trained in safeguarding and they understand their responsibility for safeguarding pupils. Parents agree in Parent View that their children are safe at school. Pupils are taught how to be safe online. They are aware of issues such as bullying and know what to do if they feel worried or anxious. The early years team is vigilant and staff are quick to spot potential safeguarding issues.

A very small number of parents are worried about bullying and about communications between them and the school. Records show that bullying is rare and parents are kept well informed of actions taken following incidents. Pupils said that they can speak to an adult if they are worried and they will get help. Families are often invited to school events and staff are visible around the school.

Checks made on all staff, governors, regular volunteers and contractors are thorough to ensure their suitability to work with children. The local authority undertakes frequent external audits of safeguarding arrangements and recommendations are addressed. Your office staff check pupils' absence promptly and attendance is above average. The few pupils who did not attend well at the beginning of the year now attend regularly.

You liaise with the local authority effectively to seek the support of external agencies. The inclusion coordinator knows the families well. One parent wrote that staff helped her whole family to access relevant services and that, in difficult times, 'the encouragement and support are amazing'.

Inspection findings

- Pupils love their school and are proud of their work. They respond very positively to the high expectations for conduct around the school and for learning in class. Bullying is rare and taken very seriously. Pupils want to attend school. They are very keen to take on responsibilities. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a strength.
- You participate in, and benefit from, a wide range of professional networks. Staff moderate pupils' work and share good practice with other local schools to check that assessment is accurate. They are not complacent and are working well with advisers from Herts for Learning to improve their practice.
- The local authority's improvement partner provides effective support and challenge to senior leaders and governors. The governors are using the financial services of the local authority to good effect. They have reorganised some committees and keep a tight control of all aspects of the school's work. They have the necessary expertise and knowledge to hold leaders to account.
- You are working hard to support staff and to ensure that pupils learn well in all

subjects. You identified promptly that improvements were needed in mathematics. The impact of your actions to improve the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes is not yet showing in all classes. Your improvement plans are fit for purpose and you are involving the new headteacher fully in key decisions. The positive ethos and strong teamwork that you have established help teachers reflect openly on their practice. They must now ensure that teaching and learning are of the highest quality across all subjects and classes.

- You listen to pupils and families to meet their needs as best you can. You improved the attendance of the small number of pupils who were too often absent from school at the beginning of the academic year. The early years area is an exciting and safe place where children learn and play very well together. In other years, pupils are well cared for. Teaching assistants and teachers are aware of pupils' individual academic and emotional needs. They plan the work and the support carefully. Consequently, pupils grow into confident, articulate and mature learners.
- Despite turbulence in staffing last year, parents are very supportive of the school. They know that staff are working hard to ensure that their children achieve highly. Their concerns about the large Year 3 class and the mixed-age classes are not ignored. With the substantive headteacher, you are checking the quality of this provision and are committed to keeping parents informed as much as possible.
- You have set clear actions to make sure that pupils' outcomes are at least at the national expectation as soon as possible. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year is usually above average, although it dipped in 2016. This relates to the specific needs of some children, particularly boys, in that cohort. Support is in place to help them in Year 1. Results at key stages 1 and 2 are above the national average and in 2016 the proportion of Year 6 pupils achieving the higher standard was above average in reading and writing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils make more rapid progress in mathematics so that outcomes for all groups of pupils are as high as they are in English and other subjects
- communication with parents is as effective as possible.

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

Yours sincerely

Marianick Ellender-Gelé
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the substantive headteacher, the inclusion coordinator, nine governors, the early years leader and subject leaders for mathematics and science. I spoke to a representative of Herts for Learning. I read a wide range of documentation and policies, including the school's self-evaluation, plans for improvement and relevant safeguarding information. I also checked the single central record that holds information about the statutory checks that are made on staff to ensure their suitability to work with children. I saw teaching and learning at first hand in all years and looked at a sample of pupils' work in their topic books and on display in corridors. I talked to many pupils in class and to a group of most-able pupils. I also heard them read. I analysed 90 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 50 additional comments sent by parents. I briefly observed some clubs after school.

For this one-day inspection, I focused on:

- pupils' achievement in mathematics
- the progress of different groups of pupils, especially those of average ability and the most able pupils
- how well the school encourages all pupils to attend school regularly
- whether the interim leadership arrangements are effective
- the quality of learning in the large Year 3 class and in the mixed-age classes
- the quality of provision in the early years
- the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.