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Mrs Nicolette Walker
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Walker

Short inspection of Russell Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 8 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 November 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Much has changed since you took up your appointment only a year ago in September 2015. You have galvanised the whole school community to improve the good practice already established at the school. Parents, pupils and staff say that the best characteristics of this school are exemplified in the 'Russell Way' and the 'not-a-second-wasted' approach through which everyone is valued and stimulated to make the school even better. Parents are overwhelmingly complimentary about your energetic, knowledgeable and dedicated leadership.

In your first year as headteacher, you quickly gained the trust of staff, identified where further improvement was required and set high expectations for the future of the school through your 'six-steps-to-outstanding-learning' strategy. You managed the expansion of the school very well and did not take your eyes off the ball during last year's extensive building project. The way you work with your deputy headteacher is effective and your respective duties are clear. This is not yet the case for phase and subject leaders. Most of them are new to their roles. They lack the confidence and skills to evaluate accurately the quality of teaching and learning in their areas of responsibility.

The school is extremely welcoming. Staff greet pupils and parents warmly on

arrival. Parents are welcomed to walk right into the classroom to speak to their teachers and there is a well-managed buzz of excitement at the start of the day. You communicate your high expectations for conduct around the school and in lessons very effectively. Pupils say that they love their school because:

- teachers are good and fun
- they get support if they need it
- teachers encourage them to do high-level work and they learn a lot
- everyone gets along and any bullying is dealt with very quickly.

This inspection confirms the views of pupils. Their behaviour and attitudes to learning are very good. Consequently, they make good progress.

The school provides very well for pupils' personal development, particularly in improving their understanding of diversity and in developing their respect for the views and beliefs of others. The pupils I spoke with were exceptionally clever at explaining how special objects used by different religions, for example Judaism, symbolise respect and that they should, therefore, respect these same objects. The school's four 'rights' (to be safe, happy, included and to learn) underpin pupils' positive attitudes to learning and behaviour. The rich curriculum and the wide range of extra-curricular activities bring learning to life. I saw in the topic books that pupils did some very good work following their visit to Wimpole Farm. They used the visit well to write exciting stories.

With the support of your experienced deputy headteacher you ensure that pupils who need help, particularly when they face challenges in their life, are supported promptly and sensitively. The success of this is seen in the school's above-average attendance. You are effectively supporting a small number of families who are not yet ensuring that their children attend school regularly enough.

I agree with parents who said that children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities receive excellent care and attention. This enables them to make good progress.

Raising expectations of what all pupils can achieve is one of your key priorities. Your accurate tracking of pupils' progress and robust monitoring of teaching ensure that the most able pupils are identified and challenged to achieve as much as possible. Although learning support assistants are highly dedicated and positive about their work, in some instances communication with class teachers is inconsistent and not effective enough. Improvement is required to ensure that the additional support accelerates pupils' progress, particularly when pupils have the potential to make good progress but need more help to do so. Your work to ensure that pupils achieve well and develop positive attitudes to learning ensures that they are increasingly well prepared to move on to the next stage in their education.

Reading is taught well and pupils read every day. I heard some of the most able pupils read and they told me exactly why they enjoy reading and why it is important to their future studies. One pupil said, 'I love big thick books to read.'

You acknowledge that worksheets are limiting pupils' ability to write at length. With the support of staff, you are taking action to ensure that this is remedied. You carefully select topics to encourage boys to write more accurately and in more detail. As a result, their attainment in writing is now as good as that of girls. You are also reviewing your approach to the teaching of mathematics to ensure that pupils practise their problem-solving skills in real life situations. I saw some good work in religious education, art and geography. Pupils explained their ideas clearly, for example about climate change and its impact on the Arctic. You are currently checking that the quantity of work in all subjects, particularly in science, is sufficient.

Learning in the early years is exciting. Parents said that their children were very happy, safe and thrilled to be at school. I can see why. There are many exciting opportunities and resources in the early years area and children want to learn. Most-able children are not always identified quickly enough. Tighter assessment is required to ensure that activities are matched closely to their already well-developed skills, knowledge and confidence.

At the previous inspection, inspectors recommended that leaders took action to improve assessment and develop pupils' numeracy and literacy skills at key stage 2. Your leadership team and governors have tackled these areas successfully. This is evidenced in a number of ways:

- you explain clearly to staff what they need to do to improve
- you provide training that is frequent and relevant to improving literacy and numeracy skills as well as pupils' personal and study skills
- you share effective practice with other schools and no one is complacent
- your tracking system and progress meetings ensure that gaps in pupils' learning are identified and their needs are met promptly.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils who completed the Ofsted questionnaires said that they feel safe at school. Parents also said that staff are extremely vigilant. You promote a strong culture of safeguarding, stressing that everyone is responsible for ensuring that pupils feel safe and are listened to. Pupils learn about how to keep safe online. There are many opportunities, through curriculum subjects, to discuss issues such as relationships, bullying and what to do if pupils are worried about something. Staff

understand and apply the school's procedures and policies to ensure that pupils are safe. All staff have had relevant training.

With the support of the deputy headteacher, you ensure that senior staff are highly visible around the school. Parents and pupils know that any concerns they have will be addressed promptly. Because the school is expanding, several pupils are new this term and some arrived mid-year. They have settled very well, including those who have experienced difficulties in previous schools.

You are quick to identify pupils who potentially need to be safeguarded. As lead professional for safeguarding, you know exactly when to access the local authority's early help or social care services. The way you keep accurate records of interventions, successes and issues helps families in a very practical way. The school works well with external agencies to secure effective support for pupils. For example, you have challenged the medical services to coordinate their appointments so that pupils who are already facing many learning challenges are not taken out of school on multiple occasions. You support pupils who are in the care of the local authority very sensitively and make effective use of special funding to meet their emotional and academic needs.

Inspection findings

- You have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas that need further improvement. Governors are highly knowledgeable and bring a wealth of expertise to the school. They continue to be effective, as reported in the previous inspection. They visit the school frequently to check progress against their key priorities. You devised your own succinct school document that, at a glance, provides the governing body with a broad range of performance information. As a result, governors have the necessary tools to hold the school to account.
- As a senior team, you are rightly focusing on improving the quality of teaching and learning. You are managing this well but the leadership of subjects is not yet fully effective. Some subject leaders and the phase leaders are new to their roles and not all are confident in their monitoring and evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment. Your ambition to make the school outstanding requires that they develop their expertise to ensure that teaching and learning are of the highest quality across all subjects and year groups.
- The positive impact of your leadership is particularly visible in the improved attendance, the good teaching of reading, the improvement in boys' writing and the high quality of the learning environment. You have a clear plan of action to ensure that weaker provision improves rapidly.

- Pupils 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 and attendance is above average. You are ensuring that children in early years are well prepared to start Year 1. Pupils are very proud of the school and keen to take on responsibilities. Their personal development is a strength.
- Your school development plan is fit for purpose and supports your aims for the school well. You are open to new ideas and the local authority adviser is supporting you very effectively. Staff access useful networks such as the FARM (Firs, Alameda, Russell and Maulden schools) and professional study groups coordinated by Redborne Upper School and Community College.
- You readily call on the local authority's expertise to conduct external reviews and provide updates on areas such as for safeguarding. You have set ambitious targets and clear actions to make sure that pupils' outcomes are above the national expectation as soon as possible.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- subject and phase leaders develop their evaluation skills to improve pupils' learning and outcomes across all curriculum areas
- communication between teaching assistants and class teachers is more effective to maximise the impact of all additional support on pupils' progress and achievement.

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

Marianick Ellender-Gelé
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you, the deputy headteacher, six governors, the early years team, and subject leaders for religious education and science. I spoke to a representative of the local authority. I looked at 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 in most classes 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 48 responses from pupils who completed Ofsted's pupil survey, 97 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 35 questionnaires completed by staff. An additional 55 parents sent comments by text.

For this one-day inspection I investigated:

- Pupils' achievement across subjects, especially the most able pupils.
- How well the school encourages all pupils, including those eligible for free school meals, to attend school regularly.
- Whether pupils are well prepared, particularly academically, to move to their middle school.
- The effectiveness of leaders in improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- The effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.