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12 December 2016

Mr Richard Lane
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Lane

Short inspection of Lark Hall Infant & Nursery Academy

Following my visit to the school on 29 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in March 2012. The school converted to an academy in January 2014 and is part of the Mercia Primary Academy Trust.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following the school's conversion to an academy in 2014, you took the opportunity to reorganise leadership roles and responsibilities. You appointed subject leaders for English and mathematics to work and share expertise across the two trust schools. This has helped to sustain the drive for improvement.

You and the deputy headteacher form a strong partnership and provide effective leadership and direction for the school. You frequently check the quality of teaching and pupils' learning. You work closely with teachers to agree the precise steps that need to be taken in order to improve the quality of teaching further. You provide well-planned support for teachers, including opportunities for them to visit other schools and learn from outstanding practice. As a result, there is a climate of professional learning and a strong team spirit across the school. Staff comments include, 'This is a small school with a caring, family atmosphere and we all want the very best for every child', and, 'Leaders are always ready to support us and, as a staff, we help and support each other.'

At the last inspection of the predecessor school, inspectors identified a need to improve standards in writing and provide more opportunities for pupils to use their writing skills across subjects. They also recommended that children in the early years should be able to make full use of the outdoor areas to support their learning.

You have addressed both of these areas effectively.

You have organised appropriate training to support the teaching of writing. You have rightly prioritised the need to support pupils' communication and language skills as part of this. You have provided opportunities for staff to observe and work alongside speech and language therapists. This has had a positive impact. Staff encourage pupils to use new vocabulary and express their views and feelings confidently. Displays around the school and in classrooms are a testimony to this. Work in pupils' books and on display shows that teachers plan interesting reasons for pupils to write across different subjects. Pupils are keen to talk about their writing. For example, young children were eager to show me their writing about Jack and the Beanstalk and the display of their 'top tips' for keeping safe on Bonfire Night.

At the end of Year 2, in 2016, standards of reading and writing were in line with the national average. The proportion of most-able pupils reaching greater depth in their writing was higher than the national average. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected level in the Year 1 phonics screening check continued to improve in 2016 and was above the national average. You have identified the need to encourage pupils to read more widely and to discuss their understanding of books so that a higher proportion of pupils achieve greater depth in their reading by the end of Year 2.

Leaders in the early years have ensured that children have regular opportunities to develop physical skills and benefit from learning and playing outside. During the inspection, children were enjoying the challenge of getting themselves dressed independently, in warm clothing, to continue their learning outside. They were able to choose from a good range of outdoor activities that reflect and support their learning and interests. In July 2016, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development was close to the national average. This is a significant improvement on the disappointing outcomes in 2015. You are not complacent however. You, and staff, recognise that there is more work to be done to sustain these improvements.

Support for pupils' well-being is a strength of the school. You appointed a family support worker to work across the trust in 2015. She works closely with staff and is highly effective in ensuring that the social and emotional needs of pupils are met. She, together with staff, provides good support for disadvantaged pupils. As a result, any differences between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the school and that of other pupils nationally are diminishing. In 2016, at the end of Year 2, disadvantaged pupils reached the expected standards in all subjects from their different starting points in Year 1. You are aware that further work is needed to ensure that the most able disadvantaged pupils are given suitably challenging tasks and opportunities, over time, to achieve standards at greater depth by the time they leave the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

'There is nowhere in or around school that I don't feel safe,' and 'If we are worried

about anything we can always find someone to talk to. We can always go to the worry lady or put something in the worry box,' are typical examples of pupils' responses when asked about safety in school. Parents overwhelmingly agree that their children are well cared for and feel safe in school.

You have a professional and effective team of people who work together to ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are well understood by staff. Staff training is regular. Staff are aware of the latest safeguarding guidance. There are weekly updates and daily informal discussions. Communication systems between the staff and the family support worker are robust. Record-keeping is detailed and of high quality. Governors and staff have received training on the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. They say that this is part of the culture of safeguarding in the school. As one lunchtime supervisor commented, 'Safeguarding the children is everyone's job. It's always at the top of our list.'

Inspection findings

- There is an effective leadership structure in school. The deputy headteacher provides strong leadership on a day-to-day basis. She has a deep and secure knowledge of teaching and learning, particularly of learning and child development in the early years. As executive headteacher, you provide strategic direction and ensure that the school benefits from subject leadership expertise in the trust.
- Leaders, including governors, have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. Self-evaluation is based on a thorough analysis of the school's performance and other relevant information.
- Governors are committed to the school and work effectively with the directors of the multi-academy trust. Link governors liaise closely with school leaders to check on the school's progress against the improvement priorities.
- The proportion of children that achieved a good level of development by the end of the early years was below the national average in 2014 and 2015. You have had to make some difficult decisions to ensure improvements. You have not shied away from this and have managed staff changes sensitively and effectively.
- You correctly recognised that children typically enter Reception Year with low levels of development for their age, particularly in language and communication skills and in reading and writing. You have ensured that pre-school prepares children well for when they begin Reception. Consequently, children's levels of development on entry to Reception are improving.
- The proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of Reception in 2016 was close to the national average. Particular areas of strength were: children's communication and language skills; writing; and self-confidence and awareness.
- During the inspection, children in the early years were observed joining in with songs and repeated refrains as they moved into different activities, including in the outdoor areas. These familiar routines help to extend children's vocabulary and support the development of children's communication and language skills.

- You have taken decisive actions to improve the teaching of phonics. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected level in the Year 1 phonics check was above the national average. You have taken actions to address weaknesses in boys' achievement in the phonics check. This has had a positive impact. In 2016, the proportion of boys achieving the expected level showed a further improvement and was in line with that of boys nationally.
- Appropriate reading resources have been purchased to ensure that pupils are able to practise their phonic skills when reading. You recognise that, although phonic skills are improving, many pupils do not have extensive experience of listening to, sharing and discussing books. As a result, they do not have knowledge of favourite books, either stories or information books, or children's authors. This prevents them from developing a love of reading and reaching the highest levels in their reading by the end of Year 2. Your subject leader is addressing this effectively.
- The progress of disadvantaged pupils is carefully monitored and compared with that of other pupils nationally. You provide support for pupils experiencing any difficulties with their learning and ensure that they do not fall behind. However, you have identified that, from their starting points in Year 1, the most able disadvantaged pupils do always achieve the outcomes of which they are capable and reach greater depth in reading, writing or mathematics by the end of Year 2. You are aware that there is a need to identify how this aspect of the school's work can be improved further.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers provide more opportunities for pupils to read widely and discuss their understanding of different types of texts, so that a higher proportion of pupils achieve greater depth in reading by the end of Year 2
- the most able disadvantaged pupils are given suitably challenging tasks and opportunities, over time, to achieve greater depth in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 2.

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

Yours sincerely

Marilyn Mottram
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders, including leaders with responsibility for English and mathematics across the multi-academy trust. I also met with three governors, including the chair of the governing body and a director of the trust. I spoke to parents at the end of the school day. I also considered the 16 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. You accompanied me on visits to all classes. We looked at examples of pupils' work and children's learning journeys and talked to pupils about their learning. I met with a group of pupils and spoke to pupils on the playground. I listened to pupils of all abilities read. I reviewed a range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation of its performance and documents related to keeping pupils safe, and we discussed the most recent information about pupils' achievement.

This inspection focused particularly on the quality of leadership and provision in the early years; how well pupils read; how you have addressed the areas for improvement from the last inspection; and on safeguarding.