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Mrs Kay Hanson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hanson

Short inspection of The Richard Clarke First School

Following my visit to the school on 10 January 2017, 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 school was judged to be good in February 2012.

This school continues to be good.

School leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. In fact, the school has gone from strength to strength. The quality of teaching has continued to improve and academic standards have risen. There is no doubt that the key driver behind these improvements is your excellent leadership. You are extremely well organised, bring a sense of purposeful enjoyment to your work and set high expectations for all. Staff, parents and pupils trust your judgement and, consequently, everyone aims to do their best. Indeed, parents express very positive views about the school and many travel from out of the immediate area in order to bring their children here. The supportive attitudes of parents, the behaviour of pupils, your attention to safety matters and the quality of governance are also significant strengths at The Richard Clarke First School.

During this inspection, I did give serious consideration as to whether the school might be judged outstanding should it receive a full inspection at this time. However, it is not there yet. Currently, there is still more to be done to build further on your work to raise standards in mathematics. Achievement in this subject was identified as an area for improvement by the previous inspection. It is clear that you have increased the level of challenge provided for the most able pupils and that overall standards in mathematics have edged upwards. Nevertheless, some of the middle-ability pupils are not yet doing as well as they could in this subject. You are aware of this and have plans in place to drive standards higher.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's routines and procedures for keeping pupils safe are fit for purpose. The governing body is fortunate to be able to call upon some specialist knowledge within its ranks and makes good use of this to keep everyone up to speed. Leaders and staff are properly informed about current requirements and this is reflected in the school's policies and practice.

The designated safeguarding leaders carry out their roles well and staff know what to do if they have a concern about a child. School records shows that staff are quick to act when needs be and that information is shared with the right people at the right time. All the necessary checks on staff and visitors are carried out and recorded correctly. Furthermore, during this inspection all the required information relating to safeguarding, welfare and safety matters was readily to hand and found to be in order. This is indicative of efficient school leadership and the high priority that is given to such matters. Everyone knows that children's safety comes first.

Pupils are taught about the everyday risks they may face and how to act responsibly and keep themselves safe. The school also organises workshops and information events for parents in order to share key messages about safety. Parents who spoke with me explained how a recent event about e-safety had been informative and helpful. They also explained that good communication between home and school was typical. Within school, pupils are able to use the internet with the secure knowledge that it is filtered and monitored with care. Pupils who spoke with me said they felt safe at school and that unkind behaviour was rare. They also told me that, should a problem arise, adults will listen and respond. Inspection evidence supports these views.

Inspection findings

- The leadership in this school is excellent. You are approachable, good-humoured and very well organised. You take every opportunity to celebrate achievement but also make your expectations clear. Your evaluation of the school's current position is accurate and your ambition for the school to reach even higher standards shines out. You have a well-judged eye for effective teaching while also being attentive to the importance of promoting decent values and pupils' welfare. Together with the assistant headteacher, you lead this school with an optimism and energy that inspires confidence from pupils, staff and parents alike. You are backed up by very capable governance. Over time, the governing body has recruited a range of complementary skills to its ranks and puts these to good use. Governors have a good understanding of their role and the school's performance and keep a strategic eye on the future. Under such strong leadership the school is well placed to build further on current successes.
- Due to the small numbers in each year group, children's starting points can vary quite considerably from one year to the next. However, over time, the majority of children start school with a level of knowledge and skill that is typical for their age. Efficient communication with home and the nearby pre-school provider means that staff are well informed about children's different abilities and

dispositions and use this information to help them settle in quickly when they start. The quality of provision in the Reception class is also a key factor in aiding a smooth start and strong progress. Indeed, the Reception classroom provides a most stimulating learning environment and teaching in this part of the school is highly effective. Children are presented with activities that grab and hold their attention, encourage cooperation and conversation, and fuel their imaginations and inquisitiveness about the world around them. For instance, during this inspection and as part of a project about the South Pole, children applied themselves to a range of fascinating and worthwhile activities that promoted independence, thought and perseverance. Whether trying to build an igloo with sugar cubes and tweezers, looking for letters hidden in pretend snow, comparing the length of icicles or thinking about how to melt a large block of ice, children of all abilities were clearly motivated to apply and develop lots of important skills. Information in children's learning journals and other school records, together with the children's confident and interested attitudes, confirms that such an engaging and effective approach is typical. Adults are kindly but also clear about what they expect. Consequently, children feel secure and develop positive attitudes to learning and to one another. Most reach a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year and are prepared for learning in the years ahead.

- This good progress continues across the school. Year after year, standards in reading, writing and mathematics have been above average at the end of key stage 1, with reading and writing ahead of mathematics. This positive picture of achievement continues across Years 3 and 4. By the time pupils move up to middle school they are ready for the challenges of upper key stage 2. Indeed, you have developed some very productive links with Oldfields Hall Middle School, which assist the transition from one school to the next. Your established links with the middle school and other local schools also serve to share expertise, benchmark standards and provide opportunities for pupils to work with a wider peer group.
- Raising standards in mathematics was identified as an area for improvement by the previous inspection. It is clear that the school has made progress with this, especially for the most able pupils. However, standards in reading and writing have also risen and mathematics has not quite kept pace with the higher standards now being seen in these two subjects. During this inspection, I talked to staff and pupils about this, and looked at teaching and pupils' work in order to find out why. You and your staff have also given this some considerable thought and the evidence points to several factors. First, the quality of teaching in reading and writing is very strong. From early years, right through to Year 4, the school curriculum offers pupils many meaningful and productive opportunities to read and write and develop their skills. Around the school, displays celebrate quality writing and phonics teaching is well pitched to pupils' needs. In Years 1 and 2, for example, I saw pupils putting their phonic knowledge to good use as they tackled unfamiliar words, in both their reading and their writing. Mathematics teaching, however, is not so consistent, which brings me to the second key factor. Over time, some pupils have rushed through crucial concepts in younger classes. While the most able pupils have managed to cope with this, some others have found it hard to keep up or have failed to grasp the necessary knowledge. They then make mistakes in later work because they have not fully

understood earlier work. You are aware of this and have made changes to the way mathematics is taught. The subject leader for mathematics leads by example and provides helpful advice to staff. In addition, two amusing superhero characters, 'Mastery Mo' and 'Dig Deeper Dave', have been created to remind pupils about the importance of secure understanding. Current practice and work in pupils' books indicates that you are on the right track and mathematics standards are starting to catch up with those seen in English.

- On this note, it is worth reporting that some mathematics teaching ensures that pupils make rapid progress. In Year 4, for instance, teaching gets the very best from pupils. In one session about the equivalence of fractions, for example, pupils were presented with pictorial representations of fractions and asked to consider the differences and similarities. From this simple yet carefully judged start, the quality of the teacher's questioning and the subsequent discussions between pupils were superb. Pupils readily articulated their reasoning and challenged one another's suggestions as they grappled with this and other questions. In doing so, they clearly deepened their understanding and the teacher was able to pinpoint what they did and did not know and refine his teaching in response. What is also apparent in this year group is the pupils' confidence to test out ideas and speak up.
- In fact, confidence and effort are much valued qualities at Richard Clarke First School. Pupils of all abilities are given the encouragement they need to have a go at numerous activities and pupils often get the chance to perform or present information to their peers. During this inspection, in a whole-school singing session, pupils sang with gusto and it was a most joyous and celebratory occasion. Photographs around the school illustrate the school's commitment to extra-curricular activities that build self-esteem, broaden horizons and help pupils to learn new skills.
- All in all, you and your staff present as upbeat, optimistic and capable and this, in turn, rubs off on the pupils. This is a school where pupils are keen to attend, enjoy their lessons, behave well and experience success.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they work to:

- raise standards in mathematics, especially for the middle-ability pupils, by making sure that they are secure in their understanding at every step of the way.

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

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the teaching staff. I also met with the school's office manager, four governors and had a telephone conversation with a local authority officer and the headteacher of Oldfields Hall Middle School. I carried out short observations of teaching in all classes, observed the start of a whole-school singing practice and looked at pupils' work in books and on display. I talked with pupils in lessons and in the dining hall and heard some pupils read in class. I spoke with parents at the beginning of the school day.

I paid particular attention to several key lines of enquiry. These included: progress since the previous inspection, children's achievement in the early years, the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics, safeguarding and the impact of leadership and management.

By the end of the inspection, there were 53 recent responses on Parent View and 35 written comments. There were nine responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and three responses to the pupil questionnaire. I took account of these responses and talked with some pupils and parents about how school staff listen to their views. I looked at a number of documents, including: pupils' progress information, the school's own evaluation of its performance, improvement plans, information about the work of the governing body, records of leaders' checks on the quality of teaching and learning, and several school policy documents. I also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. I asked members of staff, pupils and parents about safeguarding matters.