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Mrs Claire Wills
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Wills

Short inspection of Mill Ford School

Following my visit to the school on 31 January 2017 with Hester Millsop, Ofsted Inspector, 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 October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Your strong leadership has ensured that the school's vision underpins all that the school does. Your determination to improve the quality of teaching and learning has borne fruit and there is consistently good practice across the school, particularly in the assessment and recording of pupils' progress. You have led developments effectively and, importantly, taken the staff with you. As a result, there is a good sense of 'team' in the school and a shared ethos among staff to do the best for pupils. Since the last inspection, there have been some staff changes and you have been careful in your appointments of new staff to ensure their skills support pupils effectively. Consequently, you have a strong leadership team whose members are supporting you well in bringing about improvements, and a team of staff who are benefiting from high-quality support. You are managing the changing needs of pupils well and, as a result, the increasing number of pupils with autism spectrum disorders are making the same progress as their peers. Your high expectations for pupils are reflected in the increase, since the last inspection, of the range of qualifications for pupils in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form. Pupils appreciate and value highly the new curriculum, which is better preparing them for the next stage of their lives.

You have a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have effectively tackled the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report. You have improved the sixth form accommodation, such as the area students socialise in, which helps them to be more independent. As a result of your strategy to improve reading, staff are now skilled at supporting pupils to recognise the sounds that letters make. Pupils' targets for learning are challenging and you have 'raised the bar' to ensure that all pupils achieve as well they should. This underpins the school's aim that 'pupils exceed expectations'. Good systems ensure that staff know pupils' targets and feed back to them about how well they are doing. The most able pupils are given clear indicators for what they should do next to improve their work further.

Pupils are making good progress, particularly in their literacy and numeracy skills. They work hard in lessons and participate with enthusiasm, whether it is in the hydro-pool, practising their phonics or attending lessons in the neighbouring primary school. Their targets are challenging and work is closely matched to their needs. This enables them to achieve well. Pupils work cooperatively, sharing their learning, and are keen to be as independent as possible. They clearly enjoy school and the activities that they do. Pupils are eager to come to school and many attend regularly. Those parents who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire were positive about the school. In particular, they commented on how well the school meets their children's needs and cares for them.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding practice across the school is effective. Safeguarding has a high priority in the school and pupils are well supported to keep themselves safe. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Staff are well trained to identify any concerns about pupils' safety and know the procedures for dealing with safeguarding issues such as those linked to radicalisation and child protection. Regular updates on safeguarding issues ensure that staff are fully aware of the risks that pupils can face and the actions they should take. You work closely with the local agencies but do not hesitate to take immediate action if you feel a pupil is at risk and agencies are not responding effectively. The checks on staff who work at the school are robust and records are thorough.

While governors monitor safeguarding records and practice in school closely, they have not ensured that all policies reflect the very good practice that is evident in school. For example, the use of particular approaches to supporting pupils is not outlined in the behaviour policy, although you and your staff are very confident about its impact on helping both staff and pupils in managing behaviours.

Inspection findings

In agreement with you, this inspection focused on the progress pupils make, how well British values are promoted, the effectiveness of governors and leaders in checking the school's work and ensuring policies are in place, the quality of teaching

of reading and communication skills, and the effectiveness of safeguarding processes.

- Systems for tracking and supporting pupils to make good progress are well established. Pupils' targets for learning are based on the national curriculum and build on their skills over time. The targets are closely monitored by staff and achievements recorded accurately and diligently. You hold staff to account for what their pupils achieve and put interventions in place to help all pupils meet their challenging targets. Pupils now have opportunities to take a wider range of courses including in English and mathematics. The most able pupils are taking appropriately challenging qualifications.
- Pupils' personal development is promoted well within the curriculum and there is a strong focus on preparing them for life when they leave school. British values are evident in curriculum planning and a programme of study teaches pupils about democracy and the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. Pupils learn about rules and their importance, such as playground safety. The school is aware that the good practice in most classes in promoting British values is not yet consistent. Nonetheless, there are clear processes in place to bring about improvements.
- You have established a clear schedule for monitoring all aspects of the school's work. Senior leaders, including middle managers, check the quality of teaching and learning regularly, including scrutinising pupils' work to confirm they are making the progress they should. Teachers' planning is monitored and teachers meet regularly with senior leaders to ensure that the school's high expectations are maintained. Governors are rigorous in checking the school's work. They have high expectations of the information they receive and challenge leaders if they need clarification about any matter. There is a rolling programme for monitoring policies and all relevant policies are in place. Governors and staff recognise that more rigour is needed to ensure that policies reflect the good work that goes on in school.
- The appointment of a lead teacher for communication has ensured that there is a far more consistent use of signing and symbols. A good range of training has developed the skills of staff. Added to this, information technology is used well to develop pupils' communication skills. Pupils also learn signs and participate in 'sign and sing' sessions at the end of the week. All staff have been trained in supporting pupils to recognise the sounds that letters represent and pupils' work indicates that they are developing a clear understanding of phonics. You have introduced a commercial literacy strategy and skilfully adapted it to ensure pupils' needs are well met, particularly those for whom traditional approaches do not work.
- Pupils' attendance is monitored closely and attendance for many pupils is above average. There are some, though, for whom medical and mental health issues have a negative impact on their ability to attend school. Leaders are aware that a few parents do not ensure their child attends school regularly enough and improving the attendance of these pupils is a specific focus for the school. Leaders and governors follow the appropriate procedures to ensure pupils are safe and keep a close check on them. The school is working hard to find different

strategies that will encourage parents to be more involved in, and support, their child's education. For example, a family support worker has recently been employed to work with parents.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- policies reflect the good practice and procedures in school
- they continue to find strategies that will engage parents more effectively in supporting their children's education and improving attendance.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Mascal
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, you joined me and the team inspector to observe learning in classrooms. I met with three governors and the team inspector and I held a range of meetings with your senior leaders. We looked at pupils' books, folders and learning records covering a wide range of subjects. Discussions were held with a number of staff and a parent. A visit was made to the local primary school to observe how pupils are integrated in lessons. Pupils' communication skills were observed throughout the school day.

Meetings were held with the designated safeguarding lead and I scrutinised a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan, safeguarding and child protection records and the school's self-assessment information. The school's single central record and supporting documentation were scrutinised.