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Mrs Karen Headland
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Dear Mrs Headland

Short inspection of Cotton End Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 February 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 the school was judged to be good in February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. School leaders have dealt successfully with the previous inspection's areas for development. You and your assistant headteacher form an effective team because your skills and expertise complement one another. Middle leaders play a full and active part. Early years leadership is a particular strength. Your checks on the school's performance are accurate; you know what is working and what needs changing. However, plans for improvement are very extensive and cover too many areas; this dissipates energy in too many directions. One in every four members of staff responding to their online questionnaire say they do not have a very clear understanding of the goals the school aims to achieve.

From the moment they arrive, to be greeted warmly by you or a member of your staff, pupils thrive in the positive and encouraging atmosphere. The sense of community is powerful. In assembly, for example, young pupils contribute their ideas as readily as those older than themselves. They know everyone's views are respected. You and your staff believe pupils learn best when they are happy. Much is done to support pupils' well-being. Staff, governors and parents share a common determination to maintain the 'family-feel' as the school grows.

Children in early years make a positive start to their education. The proportion achieving a good level of development is improving year-on-year. This gives them a good grounding for teachers of the older classes to build on. In both the pre-school

and Reception classes, children develop positive attitudes to learning. They are keen and inquisitive. They soak up learning and respond enthusiastically. One girl, for example, recognised the word train began with 'tr'. She added that a train goes on a track, and pointed out this also starts with 'tr'. Teachers in these classes promote and encourage children to listen closely and articulate their responses, thoughts and observations. They use activities well to develop vocabulary. For example, Reception children broke eggs and described the shell, yoke and albumen (egg white). However, elsewhere in the school, staff do not routinely promote pupils' speaking and listening skills.

You largely succeed in your aspiration to inspire pupils, so they enjoy and achieve. Parents describe the school curriculum as 'real', because pupils experience so many interesting and imaginative 'hands-on' activities. Pupils speak enthusiastically of 'stunning starts', 'marvellous middles' and 'fabulous finishes' to each topic they study. Visitors and visits, such as to the Space Centre, embellish their studies. Their clear and accurate recollections demonstrate the good depth to their knowledge. Their scientific understanding benefits, for example, from following the progress of astronauts in space. Science is very evident in the curriculum, raising the profile of the subject so pupils talk about it confidently. However, pupils do not regularly plan their own investigations, for example to test their ideas and hypotheses, nor do they routinely analyse and interpret their results to explain scientific ideas.

Attainment and progress is good overall. This is confirmed by inspection evidence and the school's current in-year information. This shows that the vast majority of pupils are on track to achieve at least the expected standard for their age this year. Pupils for whom English is an additional language continue to do well. These pupils have very positive attitudes to learning and make the most of the opportunities they are given. Most disadvantaged pupils do well. This is partly because their progress is very closely monitored. As a result, if they do fall behind, staff quickly recognise this, give them extra help, and then check to make sure it is effective and they catch up. Nonetheless, the rates of progress in writing and mathematics of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, varies too much from class to class. The eldest pupils make rapid progress in mathematics. They tackle challenging work and apply what they know already to new problems. Teaching skilfully guides them to talk to one another about the different ways they can do this, and which might be best. However, in some writing we looked at, we found pupils of all abilities given identical sheets to record their responses. This particularly restricted the progress of the most able.

Safeguarding is effective.

The role of designated safeguarding leader is shared between senior staff. This ensures that it is always given high priority and that a leader is always available if needed. A governor regularly checks that safeguarding arrangements are robust and thorough. Staff relentlessly pursue the whereabouts of pupils missing who are absent and missing their education.

Thorough training means staff are vigilant, know what to look for, and fully

understand their responsibilities to protect pupils. They know and follow the clear and robust procedures. Concerns are fully and thoroughly addressed. Staff are suitably trained in first aid and paediatric first aid. Educational visits are preceded by thorough risk assessments.

Pupils say they feel safe and well cared for in school, and that they have adults to turn to if they are worried. Their understanding of potential dangers, whether using the road or the internet, is clear. In the small playground, they demonstrate a good awareness of their own safety and that of those around them.

Inspection findings

- One of my lines of enquiry was about pupils' progress through the school. I particularly wanted to look across all year groups because they vary in size and can be quite small. Your data, our book scrutiny and class visits, clearly shows that the majority of pupils in all year groups make good progress.
- I also looked at the reasons behind the disappointing 2016 results in Year 2 and, particularly, the Year 6 national tests. You and your colleagues quickly analysed the results, identified the causes and made important improvements. For example, extra help given to pupils is now tailored much more closely to their precise needs. The new approach to teaching reading skills is implemented effectively by staff, enabling pupils to learn new skills and practise them in their writing. Spelling is also now better taught, and the competitions give it an element of fun. Parents' involvement is greater too. 2016 was only the second Year 6 group at your school. Learning from your first year, you were better able to explain to parents how they could help their children at home. As a result, the groups I particularly looked at, such as disadvantaged pupils, and girls, make good progress overall.
- Another line of enquiry was phonics, because standards in the recent past have been below most other schools. We visited three classes and, in all, phonics' teaching was effective. Early years classes give children a very good grounding in letter sounds. Year 1 pupils receive clear and accurate instruction. Teachers' high expectations ensure that pupils listen and repeat sounds accurately. Pupils do well.
- Attendance was another line of enquiry. You have worked closely with families and outside agencies to improve attendance, particularly of the small number of pupils who are regularly absent. As a result, attendance is now broadly average.
- I also looked at Years 5 and 6. The school did not have these year groups when last inspected. Pupils learn in a modern, well-equipped building. Effective teaching and their positive attitudes to learning result in good progress overall.
- An important factor in the improving standards is the quality of teaching. Good training has been fundamental to recent improvements. Staff are open to new ideas, and learning from and with other local schools. Teamwork is a strong feature of Cotton End, particularly the way teachers and teaching assistants work together to provide extra help for any pupils struggling or falling behind.
- Pupils' understanding of fundamental British values is clear. The school council

gives pupils opportunities to impact on school life. Elections show pupils democracy in action. They know 'freedom of speech' means you have the right to give your views, but have the responsibility to listen to the views of others, too. They say it is fair to treat everyone the same, whatever their religion. In discussion, they gave Nelson Mandela as an example of someone who treated everyone with 'respect'.

- School leaders and governors think ahead. For example, in considering the expertise necessary to prepare for the move to larger premises, whilst setting the ambition of maintaining the 'feel' of a small school. Pupils with brothers and sisters who currently have different playtimes say they look forward to playing together in their new school.
- The school's website meets statutory requirements for published information.
- About nine in every ten parents responding to Parent View would recommend the school to another parent. Parents spoken to were full of praise for the school and how happy their children are at Cotton End.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- activities provide the right level of challenge for the most able pupils, particularly in writing and mathematics
- teachers consistently promote pupils' speaking and listening skills
- staff further develop pupils' abilities to think and work scientifically
- leaders refine the areas for school improvement so the focus is clear to staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Robert Greatrex
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your deputy headteacher. I held a meeting with your middle leaders who have responsibility for particular subjects and year groups, including early years, to discuss progress and the impact of decisions leaders have made. I met with a group of governors, a representative of the local authority, and a group of pupils selected by you.

I scrutinised various sources of information, including your assessment data, school

improvement plan and records of monitoring and evaluation. I also viewed the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks made on the suitability of staff to work with children, and attendance information. With yourself and/or your deputy headteacher, I visited most classes and observed learning, viewed work in pupils' books, and spoke with pupils about their learning.

I spoke to some parents and took account of the 26 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey for parents, and the 16 responses to the staff questionnaire. There were no responses from pupils because of a technical error.