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Mrs Cathy Elsley
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Elsley

Short inspection of Monksmead School

Following my visit to the school on 8 March 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 March 2012.

This school continues to be good.

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

There have been numerous changes since 2012. You were appointed to your first headship in January 2013, taking over from a long-standing headteacher. It is to your credit that, until recently, you have maintained a stable staff. The complement of the governing body has almost entirely changed since the previous inspection. You and your leadership team have worked hard to establish a strong, strategic direction for the school and to ensure that the standard of education you offer is the best it can be for the children and families in your community. In that endeavour, in January 2014, you initiated the expansion of the school to enable children from the age of two to attend Monksmead. The school also took over the leadership and management of the pre-nursery provision and brought it onto the school site. You are right to be extremely proud of the way that the four settings in the early years have ensured continuity of learning for the children in your community. The off-site, privately run breakfast- and after-school club closed. You opened the new and very popular provision, 'Donny's' in September 2016, much to the parents' delight. Once again, you have secured continuity for the pupils by ensuring that this is managed effectively by staff who already work in the school.

You and your leaders know the school very well. The school's plans for improvement show clearly the areas that you know still need to be developed further. The work that you and your leadership team have done to ensure that pupils have high expectations of themselves and others is evident. Pupils say that they really enjoy coming to their 'brilliant', 'spectacular' school, of which they are clearly proud. They especially like 'Donny's'; what a great start to the day this offers! Pupils come into school and begin the day with their friends in a calm and purposeful atmosphere. Older pupils read to younger ones and help them with the activities they are doing. All of them willingly help out with clearing up in readiness for the 'fit for the day' session which, again, is very popular. The same can be said for the after-school club, which is valued greatly by parents, and for which there is regularly a waiting list. One parent commented, 'Our daughter never wants to leave at the end of the day!'. Your commitment to reaching out into the community is a strength of Monksmead, right down to opening the gate on the school field between your site and the other, very local primary school, so that children in the Reception classes can meet regularly.

Parents made it very clear in their responses on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, that they are very pleased with the school's work. Many parents took the time to express their views, one saying, 'My children love going to Monksmead school,' whilst another said, 'Monksmead has helped my son in every aspect of school life'. It is testament to you and your team that you have almost 100% attendance at parent meetings, as was seen during the inspection. The school's early years provision is very well attended. During the inspection, you took parents around to show them what the school has to offer. This is a very regular occurrence as the school's good reputation goes before it; so much so, that you had over 200 applications for your 30-place Reception class last year. This is a great credit to you and your staff. However, this does in itself cause some turbulence and does not necessarily ensure that children who attend the pre-school provisions come into your Reception class. Where children have attended three of the provisions, the impact is evident in their communication skills and readiness for school.

The emphasis that you have put on improving the quality of teaching and learning is evident. Pupils are largely engaged in their learning and most are challenged to achieve as well as they can. This is not as true, however, in mathematics. Many have achieved the higher levels in reading, writing and mathematics since the previous inspection. These were areas that the school was asked to improve in that inspection. The school corridors are adorned with celebrations of pupils' work, behaviour and achievements. Pupils look forward to earning merit awards or having their work displayed on the 'Wicked Work' board. It was clearly evident in the vast majority of classes seen during my visit that pupils want to do well, enjoy talking with their partners about their learning and would actually like to be challenged even more. 'We like it when our teacher pushes us to do harder work,' said one pupil.

It is testament to you that pupils' aspirations have changed during your time in the school. Some pupils told me that they would like to be an artist, mathematician, doctor, scientist, nutritionist or teacher. The focus you have on the new mastery curriculum in mathematics is beginning to pay dividends. Sensitive, but appropriate, questions by adults ensure that pupils think about what they are learning. Such questions as, 'What have you noticed?' when pupils were multiplying decimals by 10, encouraged them to search for a pattern, which they readily did. Many pupils I spoke to could eloquently articulate their learning and explain the thinking behind their answers, for example in problem solving.

The school's work with pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, or those who are disadvantaged, continues to improve. The opening of the 'nurture' provision has been very successful. It is evident that pupils are developing self-confidence and their self-esteem is raised. This is because you and your deputy headteacher have created a provision that gives pupils the opportunity to access the curriculum in a smaller group of eight pupils. The deputy headteacher is rightly proud of the work that the school does with these pupils and shows great passion for ensuring their continued success. The school celebrates diversity exceptionally well. Much work has been done to ensure that all pupils accept their classmates, many of whom are from different cultures or backgrounds, and their differences are celebrated. Showing kindness and respect is what is expected, and demonstrated perfectly by the school's play leaders. The qualities that you insist on include being fair, helpful and responsible. The good role model that the play leaders and your teachers set is evident in all that the school does.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your governors take safeguarding very seriously. Relevant checks are made to ensure that adults are suitable to work with children. You have ensured that every member of staff is appropriately trained to keep pupils safe and to alert you of any concerns they may have. Pupils say that they feel safe and know whom to go to if they have any worries. The many posters around the school remind pupils, should they forget, whom to go to if they are worried. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe online and that they should not give out personal details to anyone. This is because you and your staff teach pupils how to keep safe and information is shown on displays around the school, for example, 'Don't be quick, think before you click'.

You and your staff are meticulous in recording any incidents of concern and you are tenacious in following up actions with the good links you have with external agencies. One parent commented, 'The school has also helped me as a parent.' Attendance of the most vulnerable pupils is improving because you have raised the awareness of the benefits of regular attendance. Parents, almost universally, are very happy with the school and the way you and your staff care for their children. One said that staff, 'go above and beyond what they have to do to keep our children well educated, feeling safe and happy' – a glowing endorsement and one with which I concur.

Inspection findings

- The first line of enquiry I undertook was to ascertain whether the school remained good in relation to the progress the school has made since the previous inspection on challenging pupils and ensuring that they are sufficiently engaged in English and mathematics. Learning seen in the vast majority of lessons during the inspection was of good quality. Pupils were on task, eager to complete their work and responded well to challenging questions or scenarios that adults posed. They do, however, want to be challenged more in mathematics and are keen for this to happen in all mathematics lessons. The proportion of pupils currently in the school who are making the expected progress and are at age-related expectations, is high. Those who are considered to be working at higher levels is increasing.
- In 2016, the proportion of pupils in key stage 1 who achieved great depth in their learning continued to be above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. The proportion of pupils who attain the higher levels at the end of key stage 2 has fluctuated since the previous inspection. Reading has continued to be above the national average, but mathematics, in particular, has not. Work in pupils' books shows that there is some challenge, although it is not as consistent as it could be in mathematics. However, pupils are largely making good progress, confirming the analysis of the school's own assessment information.
- The second line of enquiry related to how well mathematics is taught to ensure that pupils attain greater depth in the new mastery curriculum. The school has focused heavily on this area and continues to do so. The leader for mathematics has ensured that all teachers are appropriately supported and training has been comprehensive. Lessons seen during the inspection confirm that mathematics is being taught well, but there are pockets where teachers are still not as confident as they need to be. Leaders are well aware of where additional support is needed. This is because they regularly check on the quality of teaching, look at the work in pupils' books and ensure that teachers' assessments are accurate.
- The quality of discussion between pupils in mathematics lessons was high in many classes. Many were grappling with questions about how they had worked out their answers or why the answer they reached was correct or incorrect. You have obviously done much work to ensure that the mathematics curriculum is beginning to challenge pupils to think hard about what they are learning. However, not all teachers follow the school's marking and feedback policy and ensure that they provide pupils with guidance on how to improve their work.

- The third line of enquiry was to see how well children are prepared for Year 1 at the end of the Reception Year. Although the proportion of children who achieved a good level of development in 2016 was in line with the national average, there has been a decline in outcomes since the previous inspection. However, the provision the school makes for all children aged from two to five is good. The addition of the provisions for two- and three-year-olds to the school has been a bonus for the community. These are very popular. Children attend from a wide area and with very varying stages of development. The baseline of children's abilities on entry to the school's provision has been declining over time, but children make good progress in Nursery and Reception to achieve outcomes that are in line with those expected nationally.
- Great care and attention have been taken to ensure that parents are as involved as they can be in their children's early education. The developing online system of recording children's learning is already providing a good evidence base to inform future planning. The curriculum is therefore led by the children's needs, and teachers plan well in response to individual children's development. The headteacher is currently supporting the early years staff and is already making an impact on ensuring that all of the classes have consistently good teaching. As a result, predicted outcomes for 2017 are likely to be above the national average at the end of the Reception Year.
- The fourth line of enquiry related to how well the curriculum enables all pupils, especially those who are disadvantaged or have special educational needs and/or disabilities, to achieve as well as they can. You and your deputy headteacher, in her role as special educational needs coordinator, have reorganised the system of identification of pupils who need additional support. This is already paying dividends. In lessons seen during the inspection, pupils were very well supported by teaching assistants. This is because teachers plan well with, and for, teaching assistants to ensure that pupils make the progress of which they are capable.
- Scrutiny of the school's own assessment information evidenced that this group of pupils across the school, and those who are disadvantaged, are making at least expected progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Many are making more than expected progress from their varying starting points. Appropriate support, through targeted programmes, is in place through your system for mapping provision in each class. As a result, there is little evidence in books or teachers' assessments to show that there is an overall pattern of underachievement by any one group across the school. You are in the process of developing a more comprehensive process that will enable even more accurate assessment of pupils' progress in the individual targets they have been given.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers encourage pupils to challenge themselves in their learning and embed the school's core values, particularly those of 'reflect and succeed'

- the mathematics mastery curriculum is embedded, to enable pupils to achieve and progress as well as they do in reading and writing
- teachers consistently identify next steps in learning, and give pupils opportunities to respond, in line with the school's marking and feedback policy.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, your deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher to discuss progress since the previous inspection. I undertook observations of learning in all classes, many of which were with you, and viewed work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons. I held meetings with your special educational needs coordinator, a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body, and a group of pupils. I scrutinised pupils' work in their mathematics books and looked at the school's own assessment information. I examined a range of sources of information, including your self-evaluation, the school's plans for development and records of behaviour. I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures and records, the checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, and information relating to attendance. I took into account the 15 staff responses to Ofsted's survey, 27 parent responses on Parent View, four texts from parents, one letter and two emails.