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Mrs Alison Davies
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Dear Mrs Davies

Short inspection of Lowton Junior and Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 7 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 July 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Under your leadership, the school has gone from strength to strength. You have created a strong and caring team which puts pupils' well-being and learning at the heart of everything that it does. You are clear-sighted and have an accurate understanding of the school's many strengths. I am impressed by your sheer determination, passion and commitment to make the school even better. You do not shy away from any shortcomings and you make sure that staff tackle any underperformance swiftly and with vigour.

Your own commitment and that of your staff to educating the 'whole child' shine through in all that you do. The level of support given to pupils and families who are facing difficulties is second to none.

The progress that pupils make at key stage 2 is a real strength of the school. Quite simply, progress is outstanding for reading, writing and mathematics. This significant achievement was formally commended by the Department for Education. A similar congratulatory letter from the same department was sent to the school acknowledging that the education provided is 'highly effective in educating disadvantaged pupils'.

We both agree that outcomes at the end of key stage 1 are not quite as strong. Although pupils do make good progress in key stage 1, you agree that with a greater level of challenge, progress and outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics could be even better. You also acknowledge that the role of middle leaders of subjects such as geography and history could be developed further and that more detailed feedback could be given to teachers after formal lesson observations.

Your effective and strong leadership is highly valued by your staff team. They are very proud to work at the school and share your passion to drive forward improvements at a pace to ensure that each pupil achieves to the best of their ability. As a result of your encouragement and support, staff feel nurtured and empowered to develop their roles in education. The following comment exemplifies very well the feelings of all your staff: 'We are all passionate about making sure that the school succeeds.'

Parents are equally generous in their praise of you. They appreciate the 'open-door' policy that the school operates and the approachability of staff. Parents are quite rightly very proud of the good progress that their children make. They told me that their children wake up every morning, excited about going to school. The following comment sums up parents' feelings precisely: 'Sending my children to this school is the best decision that I have ever made.'

Any visitor to the school cannot fail to be impressed by the family-orientated, nurturing and caring ethos that you have created. As we walked around the school, I observed pupils who were exceptionally well behaved, polite and keen to learn. Staff enthuse pupils with a passion for learning by providing an inviting learning environment and good-quality resources.

Pupils told me that they feel very safe in school and in the playground. High fences around the school perimeter and closed-circuit television in the outdoor area and in the school's reception area add to their sense of security. Without hesitation, they talked avidly about their 'amazing teachers' and the importance of 'being resilient and never giving up'. Pupils appreciate the varied range of out-of-school clubs that your staff give so generously of their time to run. They particularly enjoy football, netball and gymnastics, which they say are well attended. Trips to Tatton Park as part of a history topic, where pupils experienced what it was like to be an evacuee during the war, and to Jodrell Bank as part of a science topic, are clearly experiences that pupils enjoy. Pupils take an active part in decision making within the school, for example as members of the school council. They also enjoy the responsibilities you give them as peer mentors and play leaders. Pupils told me that everyone is welcome at this school, irrespective of their race, gender or culture.

You and your staff have the full backing of the governing body. It is knowledgeable about most aspects of the school's work and offers you challenge and support in equal measure.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement that were identified at your last inspection. Pupils now have more opportunities to write at length across the curriculum in subjects such as history, geography and science. With the support of senior leaders, those who hold middle-management roles now take an active part in driving forward improvements within the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Keeping pupils safe and helping them to understand how to keep themselves safe is a central part of the school's work. Senior leaders have ensured that staff and governors are up to date with safeguarding training and that records are detailed and of high quality. In my discussions with staff, it was clear that they have a good understanding of safeguarding issues and procedures to follow should they be concerned about a pupil's welfare. They talk with some confidence about the potential indicators of radicalisation and sexual exploitation. There are clear procedures in place for the recruitment and selection of staff. The single central record is compliant. Those with responsibility for safeguarding and recruitment have completed training at the appropriate level.

Pupils were unanimous in their view that bullying at Lowton Junior and Infant School is rare and my scrutiny of behaviour logs confirms that this is the case. Pupils are aware of the different forms of bullying and the distress that it can cause. E-safety is well promoted. Pupils are quite clear about what to do to keep themselves safe while accessing computer technology. A filtering system is in place which adds another layer of security to help keep pupils safe while online.

Inspection findings

- You and your deputy headteacher keep a close and watchful eye on the quality of teaching. Through formal lesson observations, work scrutiny, planning reviews and learning walks, you have a good understanding of each teacher's strengths and priorities for development. However, we both agree that teachers, following observations of their lessons, are not given clear enough feedback on the impact their teaching has on the progress that different groups of pupils are making.
- Children thoroughly enjoy their time in early years. Learning is active and fun. During our learning walk, we observed happy and confident children consolidating their understanding of addition, while others were being introduced to subtraction. From their different starting points, children make steady progress in their learning. As a result of good teaching, the number of children achieving a good level of development is rising year on year. The school's own assessment information shows that 85% of children are on track to achieve a good level of development this year. This is a significant increase in comparison with last year's results. Consequently, a greater number of children are ready for their transition into Year 1.

- In 2016, the number of pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 1 was above the national average. However, the number of pupils reaching the higher standards was below average. Swift action was taken, with staff being provided with extra training and support. However, from looking at pupils' mathematics books we both agree that, at times, activities do not challenge pupils to do their very best, particularly those who learn more quickly. Furthermore, there are not enough opportunities for pupils to develop their problem-solving skills. Writing books show that pupils have good opportunities to write at length across many areas of the curriculum. For example, they now carry out more practical scientific investigations and write up their conclusions. However, on occasions, tasks are structured in a way that prevents pupils from writing in greater depth.
- I also listened to a number of pupils from Year 2 read. They read with fluency and expression and made good use of their phonic knowledge to sound out unfamiliar words. However, some of the reading books did not challenge pupils. You also told me that a small number of parents do not read with their children at home. We both agreed that all of these factors prevent pupils from reaching the higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics.
- A broad and balanced curriculum is being delivered to all pupils across the school. Work in books shows that pupils make good progress in a variety of the foundation subjects, such as history and geography. However, we are in full agreement that middle leaders of these subjects have not yet been given the opportunity to monitor their areas of responsibility with the same rigour as those responsible for English and mathematics. For example, you do not yet expect them to monitor the quality of teaching in their area of responsibility or analyse the data with regard to the progress that different groups of pupils are making as they move through the school.
- Published data highlights that last year, weak attendance and persistent absence were an issue for some pupils in the school. You showed me strong evidence that there were a number of justifiable reasons for these absences. Many of these pupils have now moved on to other schools. Current data for attendance is above the national average and persistent absence is below it. You and your staff actively promote good attendance and there are stringent procedures in place to follow up any unexplained absences.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a greater number of pupils reach the higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 1, particularly middle-ability and the most able pupils
- ensure that feedback given to teachers after lesson observations focuses more sharply on the progress that different groups of pupils are making
- develop the roles of middle leaders of subjects such as history and geography so that they have a greater impact on teaching, learning and assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheila Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and five members of the governing body. I also had informal discussions with staff and pupils to seek their views of the school. I went on a tour of the school accompanied by you and visited classrooms to see the learning that was taking place in early years and at key stage 1. I looked at examples of pupils' work, listened to pupils read and observed their behaviour during lessons and as they moved around the school. I reviewed a range of documentation, including the single central record, the school's self-evaluation, the school's development plan and records relating to the monitoring of teaching and learning. I also took account of the 33 responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire completed by parents, and of the school's own questionnaire to parents, staff and pupils.