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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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25 May 2017

Mrs Emma McGill
Headteacher
Sandon Junior Mixed and Infant School
Sandon
Buntingford
Hertfordshire
SG9 0QS

Dear Mrs McGill

Short inspection of Sandon Junior Mixed and Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 10 May 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Although you only took on the role of headteacher at the beginning of the summer term, you know the school very well from your previous role as deputy headteacher at the school. This has ensured the continuation of the school's good provision.

Your passion for continuous improvement inspires the enthusiastic staff team to strive for the best possible outcomes for pupils' personal and academic achievement. All 13 staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire agreed that the school is led and managed well. Staff enjoy working at the school and feel well supported because there are systems in place to share ideas and plan together. Parents also recognise that you are an effective leader. This is evident in the many positive comments made in Parent View which describe you as 'passionate and enthusiastic'. Parents appreciate the 'time and effort' you put into 'keeping parents engaged and informed, and building a caring and respectful environment for learning'.

There is much for pupils to look forward to at the school. The curriculum is enriched with visits, for example to a local farm and the theatre. There are also residential trips, visiting speakers and special events such as 'learning week'. This is a chance for pupils to share their skills and interests, and teach one another. Pupils told me that 'our teachers make learning interesting and fun'. Pupils want to learn, they work with sustained concentration and are keen to achieve. Almost all parents

confirmed in Parent View that their children enjoy school and make good progress.

Adults in the school provide effective role models for pupils, and teach them to be polite and considerate of others. In all classes observed during the inspection, pupils were happily taking turns, sharing equipment, and helping each other. Alongside this strong commitment to developing pupils' care, concern and respect for others, adults also encourage pupils to be confident and aspire to be the best they can be. Teachers provide many opportunities for pupils to share and celebrate their achievements both within and outside of school. Teachers also plan activities that broaden pupils' experiences and prepare them well for life in modern Britain. For example, teachers recently set up a mock temporary shelter for a homeless person on the school playground. Pupils were encouraged to consider and write about the issues around homelessness. Some pupils even wrote letters to the Prime Minister suggesting ways to reduce homelessness in this country. As a result, pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Governors speak with pride about the school and share your enthusiasm and desire to improve it further. They ensure that they are able to hold leaders to account. For example, governors have recently carried out a skills audit to make sure that they have the right breadth of skills, knowledge and experience to meet their responsibilities. Governors are highly committed to knowing the school's strengths and weaknesses through frequent visits to the school, and discussions with pupils, parents and staff.

Overall, you and the governors have maintained the strengths identified in the previous inspection and addressed effectively the areas for improvement. In particular, you and the governors provide effective leadership with a clear focus on ensuring that teaching and learning secures good outcomes for pupils. For example, you and the governors have recently managed a significant change in teaching staff. Through the school's robust induction procedures you have worked tirelessly to ensure that teachers joining the school settle quickly and that the school's high standards of teaching are maintained.

In your leadership role, you are supported well by governors and the staff team. However, you identify that in this small school you are trying to undertake too many roles of responsibility. You and the governors acknowledge that you need to develop the leadership team's capacity in order to share some of the workload. You are currently developing the role of subject leaders to further drive up standards. You have clear plans in place to ensure that these leaders are highly valued and given the necessary skills and autonomy to lead and monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects effectively.

You and the governors know the school well. You recognise the importance of evaluating the school's strengths and weaknesses and planning for future improvement. However, you acknowledge that these processes are not yet fully developed. The school's self-evaluation document is overly descriptive and not sufficiently analytical. This means that it is not fully effective in ensuring that improvement plans focus well on the most important areas. The school

development plan is not sufficiently sharply focused to bring about more rapid improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. For example, all staff meetings have a standing item on safeguarding. Rigorous checks are carried out on all who work or volunteer in the school. In addition, staff and governors receive appropriate and routinely updated training in keeping pupils safe, including from extremism. Staff know every pupil in the school and are ever-vigilant. You are diligent in ensuring that vulnerable pupils receive the support they need from outside agencies.

Pupils say that they feel happy, safe and settled in school. They told me that they know how to keep safe, for example in crossing the road or when using the internet. Pupils also say that there is no bullying at the school, and that they can talk to any adult in the school about any worries they may have. Pupils behave well in lessons, around the school, and at breaktimes. This is due to the positive relationships they have with staff and the high standards of behaviour that all staff consistently expect of them. Older pupils look out for younger ones and help them to make friends if they are on their own.

The parents who responded to Parent View unanimously agreed that their children are happy and safe in school.

Inspection findings

- In order to check that the school remains good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. I explored whether the good quality of teaching has been maintained since the previous inspection and whether a large enough proportion of pupils are achieving well from their starting points, particularly in key stage 2. This was because 2016 results showed that not enough pupils met the expected standard in reading and writing at the end of Year 6.
- You and your teachers took immediate action to improve pupil outcomes. You have made certain that teachers track pupils' progress closely using the school's chosen assessment system. As a result, teachers have a good understanding of what pupils know and can do so that they are able to plan work that is matched well to pupils' different ages, needs and abilities. You have ensured that activities stretch and challenge pupils more effectively. Teaching assistants have received training and are deployed well by the school. They provide effective support for all pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Pupils' work in books and the school's own assessment information confirm that pupils are making more rapid progress this year. Pupils are happy, confident and achieving well across all subjects.
- Another key line of enquiry focused on whether phonics is taught effectively and whether pupils make good progress in this area. The published data for 2016

showed that the proportion of pupils who reached the expected level in the Year 1 phonics screening check was below the national average in 2016. However, this was not the case in previous years. The school's assessment information, and the work in pupils' exercise books, show clearly that this result was specific to this group of pupils rather than being indicative of a wider problem, or continuing trend.

- Nevertheless, you and the governors reviewed the school's provision for phonics. As a result, staff monitor pupils' progress regularly and quickly put appropriate support in place to ensure that all pupils make good progress. Effective teaching now ensures that pupils read well and use their knowledge of phonics effectively to help them to work out unfamiliar words. They blend sounds together competently to read words, and separate the sounds in words in order to spell. This is because teachers provide them with plentiful opportunities to practise and develop these skills.
- Consequently, because of these positive actions, the school's current assessment information indicates that children's attainment in phonics will be improved from the school's results in 2016.
- My final line of enquiry was about attendance. Since the previous inspection, the attendance figures for the school have been below the national average. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have had particularly high rates of absence and persistent absence.
- You have rightly identified improving rates of attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, as a school priority. A range of appropriate measures have been introduced to ensure that no groups or individuals are held back by low attendance, for example phoning parents when pupils do not turn up for school.
- As a result of these newly introduced strategies, the school's current information shows that almost all pupils now benefit from more regular attendance. However, you agree that further work needs to be done to ensure that attendance rates continue to improve and move closer to national figures.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the role of subject leaders is developed further to strengthen and enhance the school's capacity for continued improvement
- the school's self-evaluation is appropriately self-critical, and school improvement planning focuses sharply on the most important areas, to ensure more rapid improvement.

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

Fiona Webb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- Meetings were held with you and the chair of governors where we discussed the key lines of enquiry for this inspection, the school's internal evaluation of its performance, plans for future improvement, and information about current pupils' attendance, progress and attainment.
- I gathered a range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This included observations of teaching and learning, jointly with you, in all classes; and sampling of pupils' current work across all subjects and across a wide range of abilities.
- I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms and at breaktime, and met more formally with the school council.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined, including mandatory checks made during the recruitment of new staff, and case studies about referrals made to external agencies. A discussion was held with you as the school's designated safeguarding lead.
- I also spoke to the local authority adviser on the telephone.
- The views of 50 parents who responded to Parent View, and those who spoke or wrote to me during the inspection, were taken into account, as well as the 49 responses parents made using the free-text service.
- I also considered the 12 responses to the staff survey and 33 responses to the pupil survey.