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Mrs Lisa Virnuls
Headteacher
Milton Ernest VC Lower School
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Dear Mrs Virnuls

Short inspection of Milton Ernest Voluntary Controlled Lower 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since the previous inspection, you have taken up the position of executive headteacher across the federation of two schools. Governors have supported you effectively in your new role. The school improvement partner and governors speak highly of the way you have stepped into the role with enthusiasm and ambition to further improve the school. Many parents describe the school as having a 'family feel' and say that you and the staff support pupils' individual needs well. They further commend you on the way all staff deal with any concerns they have immediately and effectively.

It is very clear that you, governors and staff are working towards a shared vision with a clear focus on improving further the outcomes for all pupils. Since the previous inspection, you have utilised the expertise within the federation well by sharing best teaching practice to develop the teaching and learning in your school. Areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection, namely writing and mathematics, and monitoring teachers' performance have been tackled well.

Your own passion and commitment to the school resonates with staff, who all say that they are proud to work at the school. Parents demonstrate a high level of satisfaction and all those who responded to Parent View would recommend the school. In their written responses, parents comment that 'all of the staff are extremely helpful, approachable and nurturing', and that 'the leadership is strong and organised'.

You have worked hard on providing a broad and balanced curriculum. For example, you have continued to provide excellent provision for physical education. The school's small class sizes have not deterred pupils from consistently achieving excellent results in county competitions, acknowledged by receiving the School Games Gold Award for the fourth year in a row.

Parents are particularly impressed with your preparation for transition to primary school. With the support of the governing body, you have embraced the challenges in preparing for the school's expansion to a primary school in September 2017. The potential challenges ahead and the vulnerabilities of remaining a small school have been well thought through.

Safeguarding is effective.

All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You ensure that the necessary checks are made on all staff prior to them taking up their appointments. Any concerns about pupils are raised immediately and all staff are acutely aware of how to monitor changes in pupils' behaviour.

Pupils report feeling safe at school. They have a good awareness of when they may be at risk and how to manage this effectively. Pupils relate this to when they are using the internet and know who to speak to if they are concerned. Parents are confident that their children are well looked after. All parents who responded to the Parent View questionnaire said that they agreed that their children are safe at school.

Inspection findings

- To ascertain whether the school remains good, one of my key lines of enquiry was about the monitoring of teachers' performance. This was given as an area for improvement in the previous inspection report.
- You regularly monitor the quality of teaching and learning, ensuring that teachers' performance is linked closely to pupils' outcomes. The tracking systems are thorough. Pupil progress meetings are rigorous and identify the progress pupils make from their starting points. Regular book checks, lesson observations and meetings with staff ensure that areas for developing teaching are identified and acted upon quickly. Developments in teaching have ensured that pupils' achievement is consistently strong in reading, writing and mathematics.
- My second line of enquiry was about pupils' writing. Developing pupils' writing skills across all subjects was an area for improvement from the previous inspection report. On visiting the classrooms and looking at pupils' work, it was apparent that a good range of writing opportunities is available across the curriculum. Pupils write about experiments they have carried out in science lessons, and link different genres of writing within topic work. In Years 3 and 4, pupils write about how the digestive system works, and, in history, about wartime London. Homework gives additional opportunities to write about their topic. In all examples, pupils consistently apply their grammar, spelling and

punctuation skills, maintaining high-quality writing in different subject areas.

- Written work in pupils' books across key stages 1 and 2 is of a high quality. It is clear that current pupils are continuing to make strong progress. Observations of pupils' work support the achievements seen in the 2016 results.
- From a young age, children have many opportunities to write. A high proportion of children in early years are already making good and better progress in literacy from their starting points, for example writing an apology letter from Goldilocks to the three bears during child-initiated activities. Children's attainment in writing in the early years has exceeded national averages for the last three years.
- We looked at pupils' achievements in mathematics, as recommended for improvement in the previous inspection report. Evidence in lessons and pupils' work show that more pupils are now capable of achieving at the higher level in mathematics, particularly in Years 3 and 4. You are currently developing teachers' skills in the teaching and learning of reasoning and conceptualisation to develop pupils' deeper understanding. However, you agreed that learning could be accelerated for some pupils, particularly where teachers do not always plan activities which take into account what pupils can already do. One of the key priorities identified by the school is to develop the teaching and learning of mathematics further, so that more pupils achieve at the higher levels.
- My final line of enquiry was about achievement for disadvantaged pupils. I wanted to ascertain how well the disadvantaged pupils achieve in all year groups. I found that the pupil premium funding is allocated effectively to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are well supported. You consider the impact of pupils' well-being on learning and ensure that you access external provision to support vulnerable pupils, including music tuition and after-school activities. These approaches are ensuring that pupils continue to achieve well in reading, writing and mathematics. Evidence from pupils' work, and the school's own tracking systems, shows that current disadvantaged pupils are making good progress from their starting points and in some instances exceptional progress.
- During the inspection we looked at the issues that you have identified for improvement about pupils' attendance, particularly for pupils who are persistently absent from school. We discussed the poor attendance for some pupils. You have recognised the importance of continuing to work with the families of these pupils and increase the effectiveness of measures taken to improve the attendance.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers plan work which takes into account what pupils can already do in English and mathematics, so that more pupils achieve at the higher levels
- pupils develop a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts so that they can explore their understanding and justify reasoning
- the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school is reduced to below the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

Cindy Impey
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- During the inspection, I met with you, the senior leader and three governors.
- I visited all the classrooms. Examples of children's work from this year and last year were looked at. I observed children's behaviour during activities and as they moved around the school.
- A number of documents were reviewed, including the school's records of monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, the single central record of employment checks, the school's self-evaluation, pupil assessment and progress information, and the school improvement plan.
- I took account of the 20 responses to the online Ofsted questionnaires completed by parents, and nine text messages from parents. In addition, six responses from staff were considered.