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Mrs Kathryn Dwyer
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Dear Mrs Dwyer

Short inspection of Maulden Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 20 June 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 October 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. There have been several changes of leadership and governance over the last year. You joined the school in January 2017, and your deputy headteacher, the chair of the governing body and the vice-chair of the governing body, all took up post in April 2016. This relatively new leadership team is committed to creating the very best educational experience for every pupil in their care and you are all making good progress towards achieving this aim.

The local authority has ensured that leaders have been provided with appropriate and sufficient support to enable them to rapidly become effective in their roles. As a result, leaders, including governors, are confident and knowledgeable. They have a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and have successfully sustained a hardworking, happy and effective school.

You and the deputy headteacher work well together. You have different skills and personalities and these complement each other well. You share the same motivation to continually move the school forward. Together, you have developed a culture of high expectations and of sharing expertise to raise standards. Staff members' responses to Ofsted's questionnaire were universally positive because staff enjoy working at the school and share their leaders' ambition for further improvement.

Leaders have created a culture where a focus on values is at the centre of all that you do. The school's values such as friendship, forgiveness and respect are evident throughout the school. Pupils talk confidently about what they mean and understand the importance of everyone using them in their day-to-day life.

Pupils behave well. They are polite and friendly, good mannered and welcoming. They told me: 'Anybody is welcome here. We would treat them how we want to be treated.' Pupils contribute fully to the purposeful learning environment that is a positive feature in the school. In all classes and around the school, I observed adults and pupils clearly enjoying working and being together.

The majority of parents are pleased with the school. Many who provided responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, spoke about the hard-working staff and the good progress their children make. One parent commented that the staff 'go over and above what might be expected'. Another parent said: 'I am well aware that the school has had some challenges but I have found both the teachers and leadership team approachable and professional. Above all else everyone puts the needs of the children at the heart of what they do.'

One area for improvement identified at the previous inspection was to make sure that teaching assistants are deployed well by the school. You ensure that teaching assistants receive appropriate training and professional support to improve their practice. As a result, teaching assistants now show a good level of skill, which they apply effectively throughout lessons. During the inspection, I saw teaching assistants teaching phonics lessons successfully to small groups of children. Teaching assistants were also observed supporting groups of pupils and questioning pupils effectively to ensure that they understood their learning and knew how to improve their work.

At the time of the previous inspection, you were also asked to strengthen the school's evaluation and development planning by clearly identifying what needed to be done to secure further improvement. You explained to me that all leaders, including governors, are now involved in developing these documents. When we looked at these together, we agreed that plans are sharply focused with defined actions to move the school forward. Consequently, the plans enable governors to hold leaders fully to account for their roles and responsibility to improve the school.

You and the governors recognise that there are still areas to develop to further improve pupils' outcomes. During the inspection, pupils said that they enjoy their learning and like their teachers, who 'help us to improve our work'. However, they also told me that they wanted to write about 'real things' and for some of their lessons to be 'more interesting'. You are keen to encourage the pupils' eagerness to write and have rightly identified that pupils should produce the same high-quality writing in other subjects as they do in their literacy lessons. Consequently, you are refining the school's curriculum plans ready for the new academic year. Your intention is for these plans to include creative opportunities across subjects such as history and geography, so that pupils gain exciting, first-hand experiences that then encourage them to write more successfully.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. All required checks on staff are carried out rigorously and recorded carefully. Leaders, governors and staff undertake regular and up-to-date training on child protection and safeguarding issues. All staff have a good understanding of their responsibilities to ensure children's safety and well-being. The files I scrutinised indicate that staff make prompt referrals when they have any concerns. Leaders are tenacious in seeking and pursuing external support when needed.

Pupils said that they feel happy and settled in school. They told me that they know how to keep safe, for example when using the internet. Pupils also said that there is no bullying in the school and that the adults quickly sort out any problems or concerns they might have. Pupils feel proud of their school. They said, 'We look after everything in this school.'

The parents who responded to Parent View strongly agreed that their children are happy and safe in school. They commented that at Maulden Lower School the teachers are 'kind and generous', and they 'obviously care about the general welfare and education of the children'.

Inspection findings

- In order to check whether the school remains good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. I considered the quality of teaching and learning in the early years and the progress children make in the Nursery and Reception classes. This is because, since the previous inspection, the school has extended its age range and now includes nursery provision. Also, the published data showed that in 2015 and 2016 the proportion of children who achieved the expected level at the end of the Reception Year was below the national average. Developing the early years provision in the school is already a priority in your improvement plans, and leaders have put in place effective actions to raise children's achievement.
- The inclusion of nursery provision has been successful and you correctly judge the early years to be a strength of the school. The enthusiastic early years leader has a good grasp of the strengths and weaknesses in this provision. She has welcomed the support of a local authority advisory teacher in improving the quality of teaching in the early years. The learning environment in the Nursery and Reception classes is well organised, bright and stimulating. Staff make sure that expectations are high, routines are clear and tasks are typically well matched to children's needs. Through effective questioning, adults support children to develop their confidence and skills, especially when choosing what to learn and how to play with the wide range of stimulating indoor and outdoor resources.
- From looking at the work produced in children's learning journeys, it is evident that the children in the Nursery and Reception classes make good progress from their individual starting points. The proportion of children making a good level of development has increased sharply and is now above the national average.

- Another line of enquiry was to check the progress and attainment of pupils in reading, writing and mathematics in lower key stage 2. This is because pupils leave the school partway through a key stage and there are no statutory national assessments to indicate their achievement.
- Pupils who remain at the school after key stage 1 make good progress because of the positive relationships between teachers and pupils. Classrooms are attractive; displays celebrate pupils' work and provide them with helpful prompts and examples of how to make their work better. Pupils willingly follow teachers' instructions in lessons. Staff encourage pupils to discuss and explain what they are learning and, subsequently, to deepen their understanding. Teachers give pupils specific feedback on their learning, with opportunities to act upon that feedback to improve their work. Pupils respond well and this results in better achievement.
- From the work in exercise books and from speaking with pupils, the evidence shows that pupils continue to make strong progress in reading and mathematics. As a result, pupils are being equipped with the academic skills to be fully ready for the next stage of their education.
- Finally, I investigated whether leaders are ensuring that pupils across the school make good progress in their writing. This is because published data for 2016 shows that at the end of the Reception Year fewer children than nationally attained the expected level in writing. Additionally, at the end of Year 2, the proportion of pupils in 2016 who reached the nationally expected standard in writing, was below the national average.
- You have already identified improving pupils' achievement in writing as a whole-school focus and have made rapid, effective changes in this area. In the early years, leaders have introduced many opportunities to engage both girls and boys in writing. During our visits to their classes, we saw children in Nursery eagerly tracing the letters of their names in the sand tray. In Reception, children were enthusiastically writing notes to Sprinkle, the fairy who had mysteriously left a tiny letter for them overnight. Another group of children were confidently writing instructions on how to build a house.
- Across key stage 1 and lower key stage 2, there is a regular focus on the basic skills of handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation. The effective application of these skills can be seen in pupils' high-quality independent writing, for example stories, newspaper reports and structured poems.
- This breadth and quality of work shows that pupils are making at least good progress in writing from their various starting points. The school's assessment information shows that attainment has improved in the early years and at the end of key stage 1, where results for both year groups are now above national figures. However, you acknowledge that pupils have limited opportunities to practise their writing skills in other subjects. Furthermore, teachers do not consistently provide creative and exciting experiences across the curriculum to enthuse pupils to write with imagination and flair.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers plan more opportunities in all curriculum subjects that inspire pupils to creatively develop and apply their writing skills.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. 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, the deputy headteacher, the early years leader and governors, including 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.
- A range of evidence was gathered 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.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey to take into consideration. However, I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms about their learning, and met more formally with a group of pupils to talk about their school experience.
- 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 and the school's designated safeguarding lead.
- I also met with the local authority adviser.
- The views of 52 parents who responded to Parent View were taken into account, as well as the 50 responses parents made using the free-text service and an email received from one parent.
- The nine responses to Ofsted's online staff survey were also considered to obtain staff views.