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Mr Adam Campbell
Headteacher
The Firs Lower School
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Dear Mr Campbell

Short inspection of The Firs Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 13 September 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Despite a high number of staff changes over the last two years, there is a strong sense of teamwork across the school. You have maintained good levels of challenge to staff while ensuring that the school continues to be a happy and friendly place in which to learn and work.

As the headteacher, you have built a strong leadership team that plays a full part in securing improvement. Together, you, your staff and the skilled governing body are ambitious for your pupils, their families and the community you serve. This is strongly demonstrated by the governing body's recent decision to take over management of The Saplings pre-school in order to enhance further early years provision in the town.

The school's motto, 'Working together to achieve our best', is demonstrated daily by staff. Pupils make a considerable contribution to the success of the school in the way that they work hard, behave well and support each other. They respect others, and have positive attitudes to their learning. They enjoy learning about the 'value of the month' and take a good part in assemblies led by outside visitors.

Following the previous inspection, you were given a number of areas to improve.

These have been tackled effectively. You and your staff were disappointed with the test results at the end of Year 2 in 2016. The leadership team reacted decisively to this and you took the right steps to tackle the dip in attainment. As a result, pupils are again making good progress across the school. Consequently, the proportion of pupils working at or above the expected standard at the end of Year 2 rose sharply in 2017.

Your planning for improvement is sharply targeted on the right priorities. For example, you are currently focusing on improving boys' attainment in writing in key stage 1 because you know that it is still not good enough. A good start has been made to this by making writing activities in key stage 1 more inspiring to boys. Your plans to strengthen this aspect of the curriculum further are well considered.

Most parents speak highly of the work of the school. The vast majority would recommend it to others. Typical comments included, 'My daughter is loving all the aspects of learning,' and, 'I feel that all of my daughter's needs are being met academically, emotionally and socially.'

Parents are particularly positive about provision for children in the early years. Although children had only been in the Reception classes a few days at the time of the inspection, they had settled remarkably quickly. In the early years, teachers make good use of a well-resourced outdoor area to help children explore their own ideas and to improve their skills across the curriculum.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of good quality. You and the governing body put the pupils' safety and well-being at the heart of all you do. Both governors and staff carry out regular reviews of the school's safeguarding policies. You adapt practice where it could be improved further.

You ensure that staff are well trained in child protection procedures. They make appropriate use of the school's systems for registering any concerns they may have. You take swift and appropriate action when you need to involve outside agencies and you persevere when you think that they could do more to support a child in your care.

Most parents are confident that their children are kept safe. Pupils have a good understanding of how to avoid danger. They say that staff are quick to identify problems and to give them help when needed.

Inspection findings

- We met at the start of the inspection to agree the key lines of enquiry for my day in school. The first of these was boys' progress in reading and writing in key stage 1. We wanted to look at this because in 2016, boys attained less well than girls in national assessments at the end of Year 2. I found that boys' attainment in reading has been greatly improved since then. However, there continues to be too large an attainment gap between boys and girls in writing. Boys' attainment

in reading has improved because you give closely targeted support to any pupils who are in danger of falling behind. You have rightly identified that this good practice could now helpfully be extended to support boys to make even better progress in writing.

- We also looked at pupils' attainment and progress in Years 3 and 4. This was a focus because I had no pre-inspection evidence on this aspect of the school's work. Having looked at a range of pupils' books in different subjects, I was reassured that you have maintained the good progress in Years 3 and 4 that was found at the time of the last inspection. Pupils' books and your own assessment information confirm that by the end of Year 4, most pupils are working at or beyond the attainment expected for their age in English and mathematics.
- I could, however, see that the high quality of work seen in English and mathematics across the school is not always evident in pupils' science work in key stage 1 or Years 3 and 4. This is because not all science topics are covered in sufficient detail to allow pupils to develop a full range of skills, knowledge and understanding. We agreed that this should be a focus for future improvement.
- We also looked at provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. I wanted to focus on this because a significant proportion of these pupils failed to reach the expected standard for their age in 2016 at the end of Year 2. I found that the comparatively new special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) manages provision effectively. There are good systems for identifying pupils who need additional support and they are quickly given well-targeted help. The SENCo checks provision carefully, adapting interventions as needed across the school year. In class, teachers take good account of the needs of these pupils, ensuring that progress from mainly lower starting points is good.
- My fourth line of enquiry looked at how well teachers meet differing needs in lessons. This was identified as a weakness in the last inspection report. I found that this is much improved. Teachers work hard, preparing work that is interesting, and now meet the needs of their pupils precisely most of the time. Teachers use a consistent approach to assessment throughout the school. If a pupil has not grasped a concept, the teacher quickly gives them further guidance and support. This immediate response ensures that they do not fall behind. Since the previous inspection, you, other leaders and governors have greatly strengthened your systems to check on pupils' progress. Consequently, you can intervene quickly when you identify any pupils who may need extra help.
- Finally, as part of the inspection focus on safeguarding, I looked at how effectively the school deals with complaints. I wanted to check this because a very small number of parents had raised concerns about this aspect of leadership and management before the inspection. I am reassured that you deal with complaints appropriately. Your complaints policy is readily accessible on the school website and the evidence that I saw indicated that it is followed carefully. The knowledgeable governing body oversees procedures carefully and reviews them regularly to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the attainment of boys in writing in key stage 1 improves
- the quality of pupils' work in science improves so that it is of the same high quality as that in English and mathematics.

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

Mike Capper
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Evidence collected on inspection included:

- observations of teaching and learning across the school during learning walks with the headteacher and assistant headteacher
- meetings with leaders and members of the governing body
- discussions with parents at the start of the school day and the scrutiny of 88 responses to the Ofsted 'Parent View' questionnaire
- consideration of a range of information supplied by the school, including checks on the quality of teaching, the school development plan, school policies and records relating to attendance and safeguarding procedures
- listening to some pupils reading in lessons, and a scrutiny of school assessment information and pupils' books in different subjects from both this and the last academic year.