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Ms Vivienne Mills
Headteacher
Milton Keynes Primary Pupil Referral Unit
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Dear Ms Mills

Short inspection of Milton Keynes Primary Pupil Referral Unit

Following my visit to the school on 1 November 2017 with Hilary Goddard, Ofsted Inspector, 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 January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Subsequent to the previous inspection, there was a decline in the provision. However, your dedication, along with the commitment of the governing body and the teaching staff, has effectively arrested this decline. Since taking up your post two years ago, you have rejuvenated the provision. After joining as headteacher, you wisely made a number of deep and transformative changes. You established new guiding principles for your work, placing pupils' well-being and development at the heart of all that you do. You are not complacent and have plans to make further improvements. You rightly acknowledge that practice in some aspects of teaching is underdeveloped.

Pupils are supported well by the provision, which has a welcoming and upbeat feel. They showed us consideration and courtesy, commenting that they feel safe and well cared for. Pupils benefit from the additional help and assistance you provide. You have wisely shared the rationale for introducing key approaches, such as reflection and calming techniques, with staff and pupils alike. Guided effectively by the staff, some pupils are beginning to employ these approaches to regulate their own behaviour. Of note is the way that your teaching assistants work effectively alongside staff in the pupils' main schools to ensure that individual pupils successfully reintegrate. Through this, and other outreach work, you and your staff are enhancing levels of professional expertise throughout the authority. You collaborate well with local authority stakeholders, who recognise how much the

provision has improved.

You have developed the curriculum so it better meets the needs of pupils. In so doing you have implemented the areas for improvement from the previous inspection report. You have introduced a range of creative subjects that are enabling pupils to express themselves with increasing confidence and boost their self-esteem. In this way, you are fulfilling the aims of your school motto, 'High ambitions for all; dreaming out loud together – changing attitudes one step at a time'. In addition, you have ensured that pupils are provided with sufficient opportunities to access learning in core subjects, such as mathematics. You have also wisely altered the structure of the day so pupils commence it with a calm period of reflection, and learning sessions are shorter than they were in the past. These changes have assisted pupils in rekindling their enjoyment of learning, especially in the creative subjects. Pupils speak positively about their experiences during their time in the referral unit.

You have strengthened the skills of the teaching staff by providing them with training and guidance. Teachers and assistants are calm when pupils show signs of frustration and they successfully deploy de-escalation techniques, when necessary. Teachers and teaching assistants use a range of well-considered approaches to arouse pupils' interest in the topics they are studying. For instance, they introduce pupils to topics using visual and auditory stimuli. Pupils also enjoy using the computer to draft and edit their work. However, they sometimes struggle to express themselves in writing. They are not clear enough about the stylistic features they need to employ for different types of writing. In addition, sometimes teaching staff are not explicit enough about the skills, knowledge and understanding pupils should apply in order to succeed in open-ended tasks. You have sensibly identified improving teachers' and assistants' practice in this area as a key priority.

Despite some turbulence in the governing body, with an acting chair for a brief period, governors have maintained their sharp oversight of the provision. They have made a positive contribution to the improvement journey the school has been on, supporting you in making root-and-branch changes. Governors sensibly focus on ensuring that the curriculum fully meets the needs of all pupils. They also systematically challenge you to explain the anticipated benefit that proposed changes will have on pupils' learning and well-being.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding procedures and policies are fit for purpose and effective. Ensuring pupils' safety is of paramount importance to you and your staff. You have sought to develop expertise in safeguarding through effective staff training. For example, you regularly introduce staff to a range of different possible safeguarding scenarios and explore with them how they might respond in real life. This approach has led to in-depth discussions about the best way of supporting pupils. In addition, the school's relentless focus on improving pupils' sense of well-being contributes to their safety and welfare.

You have introduced a new approach to following up on absence. Now every absence is followed up fully with parents or carers by a personal phone call, or visit if necessary. The diligence you have shown in this has enabled you to get a fuller picture of pupils' home lives. You have used your insights to ensure children get the support they need, including from the authority's welfare services.

Inspection findings

- We explored the impact of the changes you have made on pupils' well-being and self-esteem. You and your staff have successfully revitalised the school. The school now has a positive and optimistic atmosphere. The environment has been carefully planned so it provides spaces for contemplation, collaboration and specialised learning. No opportunity is missed to reinforce messages that will support pupils in building their self-esteem. For example, the school's logo is 'the world's most beautiful school'. As a result, pupils respond well to the experiences the referral unit provides. Pupils' attendance over the first half-term was an improvement on their average attendance over the last academic year and was well above national averages for similar provision.
- Local authority partners value the positive effect the unit has on most pupils, and praise the way pupils transition back to mainstream in a timely and successful manner. Of note is the way referral unit staff collaborate with staff from pupils' main schools. On the day of the inspection, a teaching assistant from one of the pupils' main school was spending the day at the unit. This had been arranged to help the assistant gain a deeper understanding of the best approaches to use when the pupil returns to their main school.
- The positive way that you work with pupils supports them in making the right choices. Pupils are guided to reflect on any poor choices they make so that they develop a more profound understanding of what motivates them to misbehave. As a result, incidents of poor behaviour decline during the period in which pupils are placed at the referral unit.
- Pupils benefit from additional therapies and well-planned opportunities for self-expression. For example, targeted pupils work with a professional art therapist. Pupils are also provided with the chance to communicate their thoughts and feelings through art, music, drama and poetry. They are proud of their creative skills, and a number of pupils have had their poems published in a commercial poetry anthology. Nevertheless, pupils are not clear enough about the features of different styles and forms of writing.
- Teachers and assistants have rightly focused on developing pupils' levels of engagement. They have come a long way in strengthening their practice in this area, including by introducing mathematical equipment to help pupils' calculation work in numeracy. Due to effective strategies, pupils are hooked by the way teachers introduce new topics. However, sometimes pupils do not engage well with the open-ended tasks they are set. They are not clear enough about which specific skills, knowledge and understanding are required to succeed at some more creative tasks. For example, pupils were uncertain about the numeracy and literacy skills required to write a business proposal, although they were excited

when the teacher initially introduced the topic.

- You have not shied away from holding difficult conversations with parents about concerns, including those relating to pupils' welfare. You operate a policy of honesty and transparency, placing pupils' needs at the centre of your safeguarding work.
- Governors have significant expertise that they bring to bear on their roles. They have used their insights to challenge the school about the curriculum. They have rightly requested that the topics covered dovetail well with those outlined in the 2014 national curriculum.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils are clear about the specific knowledge, skills and understanding they need to employ in order to succeed in open-ended tasks
- pupils develop confidence and skill in writing in different styles for different purposes.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors checked safeguarding arrangements, including the records of recruitment checks, policies and procedures. They reviewed a range of published information, the school improvement plan and the school's self-evaluation. Inspectors observed learning, accompanied by the headteacher on four separate occasions, and also observed pupils at breaktime and lunchtime. They explored the changes leaders have made to assessment and the curriculum, and met separately with a group of teaching assistants, two groups of pupils, and the art therapist. They also held meetings with the school improvement partner, local authority representatives, the ex-chair of the governing body, the current vice-chair, and also with parents informally at the end of the day. Inspectors undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work.