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Coert van Straaten
Headteacher
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Dear Mr van Straaten,

Short inspection of Holywell Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 29 November 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.

Holywell Primary is a very large school where leaders and governors are working with a noticeable determination to drive up standards and ensure that everyone on the staff has the highest expectations about what pupils can achieve. Many parents I spoke to informally at the start of the day were very complimentary about the quality of teaching and the support available for families. Typical comments included, 'Everyone is really safe and happy here', and 'Communications are good and my child settled in quickly and has made good progress.' These views were endorsed by the majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and by texting their positive perceptions of the school. Many parents appreciate how easy it is to contact school leaders, many of whom are out on the playground every morning before school, welcoming pupils and talking to parents and carers.

Governors know the school well. They recognise the strong focus on school improvement introduced since your appointment. They are actively supporting your efforts to ensure that all teachers share the same high expectations. Furthermore, they understand how your leadership is raising standards right across the school.

You have led the school through a period of leadership transition and some important changes to senior posts. You have managed these changes well, and you

have ensured that your strong focus on monitoring and staff development has continued. You have been working hard to ensure that every class teacher has clear expectations about the progress that pupils are expected to make. You and other senior leaders carry out regular learning walks to check that classrooms, books, lessons and resources are well organised and helping pupils to learn well.

You have also been giving a high priority to improving pupils' attendance and, as a result, absence reduced across 2016/2017. Your plans show that you know that there is still work to be done to fully achieve your aims.

Pupils behave well in lessons and around school. They show respect and courtesy to staff and visitors. They are interested in learning and they work diligently to present their work carefully and meet teachers' expectations. Teachers provide clear explanations so that pupils understand what is expected of them in lessons.

Outcomes for pupils at the end of key stage 2 have been lower than national expectations in recent years, although many pupils have made good progress from their starting points. You are fully aware of this and you have been working hard to ensure that progress is even stronger. Standards of work seen in books during the inspection showed that more pupils are now achieving in line with other pupils nationally. The wider curriculum meets pupils' needs well, and the highly effective, specialist teaching of Spanish and art has resulted in these subjects being particular strengths of the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records of staff suitability to work with children are detailed and of good quality.

You and the governing body ensure that staff are kept up to date with safeguarding requirements. Staff understand their role in keeping pupils safe. They are well equipped to identify when pupils may be at risk of harm. Safeguarding records, including the large number of files about pupils receiving support from other agencies, are securely maintained. They include comprehensive information about how leaders follow up any concerns. Leaders seek appropriate advice and support from other agencies when the need arises.

The pupils I spoke to told me that they feel safe at school. They consider bullying and bad behaviour to be infrequent events and they are confident that any member of staff, not just their teachers, will listen to them if they have concerns. An overwhelming majority of parents agree that pupils are safe and well cared for at the school.

Inspection findings

- To discover whether the school remained good, one of my key lines of enquiry was the actions that leaders have taken to make pupils' progress consistently strong across key stage 2. In 2015, mathematics progress was too low, and in

2016 reading progress was below average. The situation improved in 2017 when pupils' progress in both reading and mathematics was broadly average and progress in writing was above the national average. Evidence from the school's action plans confirms that your leadership team has already identified the need to continue this work. You acknowledge that it is important to ensure that progress in English and mathematics is consistently good every year.

- Leaders have made good use of professional advice from Herts for Learning, especially in the drive to improve the teaching of English and mathematics. For example, you have introduced a new approach to support teachers with planning the mathematics curriculum, and you have invested wisely in training for subject leaders and teachers.
- Regular checks, undertaken by senior leaders, ensure that teachers' expectations are high. You use the information from frequent learning walks to help teachers improve their skills, to confirm that pupils' books are well presented and to ensure that classroom displays contribute to pupils' progress.
- You have introduced new approaches to mentoring, which support the development of teachers. The use of video technology, introduced this term, allows teachers to record lessons then discuss the content with colleagues as part of a professional dialogue.
- Your strong focus on moderation activities means that teachers and leaders can be confident in the accuracy of information about pupils' learning. You have provided frequent opportunities for staff to discuss assessment with colleagues in local schools. This is helping to ensure that judgements are reliable. The impact of this work is already evident in the improvements in progress that we saw in pupils' books.
- Less experienced teachers, including those who are newly and recently qualified, also receive effective professional development from senior colleagues.
- In order to improve outcomes in reading, you have invested heavily in new reading books, as well as materials for teaching phonics. Staff have attended additional training, particularly in phonics and in promoting pupils' skills in inference and deduction. This is proving particularly effective in supporting pupils, especially those who are not yet fluent speakers of English, to be more successful in comprehension activities.
- My second line of enquiry was the quality of teaching in key stage 2. There have been some inconsistencies in the progress that pupils have made in recent years, especially in English and mathematics.
- When I visited classrooms, I identified plenty of strengths in the quality of teaching. Most lessons are well planned and learning is clear and well structured. Teachers usually ensure that pupils are interested and engaged in learning activities and, as a result, pupils in most lessons behave well. When a pupil is not concentrating, teachers are usually quick to spot this and take corrective measures.
- Teachers manage pupils' behaviour well. Relationships are positive and conducive to cooperation and learning. Tasks are generally pitched at a good level with an appropriate balance between consolidation and introduction of a new concept.

Teachers frequently ask pertinent questions of pupils. This ensures that pupils are required to think hard, and any misconceptions can be quickly addressed.

- Nevertheless, I was able to agree with you that there are some discrepancies, particularly in levels of challenge and expectation in some lessons. As a result, the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment includes a number of inconsistencies.
- You are continuing to ensure that all teachers are fully equipped to promote rich vocabulary in lessons. You are ensuring that pupils have frequent opportunities to participate in discussions and to practise using language structures that will help them reach and exceed national expectations.
- During the inspection, we both identified some lessons in which teachers needed to be more specific about how pupils were going to be successful. In most books, we saw that pupils were given feedback in line with school policy. We did agree, however, that where this does not happen consistently, opportunities to correct errors or extend pupils' reasoning skills are missed.
- My next line of enquiry was attendance. In the most recently published information about the school, absence rates were well above the national average for primary schools. Furthermore, too many pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils, were classed as being persistently absent, because they were attending school less than 90% of the time.
- You have been working hard to improve the situation. You have ensured that all appropriate sanctions are used, including referring pupils for specialist intervention, requesting penalty fines and taking legal action. You have written to parents to explain the importance of regular attendance and the difficulties of securing high-quality learning if pupils are not in school. You told me that you do not authorise holidays in term time. You also ensure that pupils are appropriately recognised and praised for their good attendance.
- As a result of your actions, attendance has improved slowly but steadily over the last two years. Across 2016/2017, there was a marked improvement in attendance for most groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, although the overall figures are still not as high as they should be. We agreed that your work to improve attendance needs to continue.
- My final line of enquiry was the quality of support available to disadvantaged pupils and the use of national funding to support eligible pupils. In 2016, disadvantaged pupils at the school made significantly less progress than other pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. This improved considerably in 2017, although the standards reached by disadvantaged pupils at the end of Year 6 were still below the national average.
- When I reviewed your use of the pupil premium grant, including your analysis of the impact of recent strategies, I found that a considerable amount of thought and detailed planning goes into the organisation of provision. Disadvantaged pupils at Holywell Primary School are given a great deal of support. This includes specific help with learning and with social and emotional development.
- You are communicating the strong message that no pupil's background, however difficult or troubled, is an excuse for underachievement at school. Teachers and

teaching assistants have a good understanding of the diverse and often multiple needs of the disadvantaged pupils at Holywell Primary School.

- There are numerous opportunities for pupils to catch up, but you also ensure that teachers take a flexible approach; if a particular strategy or intervention is not working for any pupil, a new approach is tried.
- A notable strength is the personalised feedback, provided at regular intervals for disadvantaged pupils. Teachers provide in-depth written marking, following the school policy, twice a week for disadvantaged pupils, together with regular verbal feedback. These dialogues ensure that eligible pupils understand exactly how to improve their work. This builds their confidence and improves their enjoyment of learning.
- Scrutiny of work in pupils' books, as well as information from the school's own assessment system, shows that disadvantaged pupils currently in the school are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. However, there are still gaps between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and the attainment of other pupils nationally.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the percentage of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, achieving age-related expectations in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 2 improves to be at least in line with national averages by:
 - ensuring that teachers plan lessons which consistently challenge all pupils in reading, writing and mathematics, especially at key stage 2
 - improving the attendance of all pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils, and reducing the number of pupils who are persistently absent.

I am copying this letter to the director of children's services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Nicholas Rudman
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

- I met with you and your senior leadership team to discuss the school's priorities for development and the impact of actions taken.
- I also met the leaders who have responsibility for mathematics, Spanish and the

pupil premium grant fund, to discuss outcomes for pupils and the impact of decisions that leaders have made.

- I met with three governors including the chair of the governing body, a parent governor and the vice chair of governors.
- I met with a representative from Herts for Learning that has been providing useful advice to the school.
- I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including your records of monitoring and evaluation, governing body minutes of meetings, plans and records for the use of additional funding, and the school's assessment information for all year groups.
- I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks that leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, and information relating to attendance.
- We undertook joint observations of learning across the school, looked at work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons.
- I analysed information from Parent View, Ofsted's online system for collecting the views of parents, including responses received by text. I scrutinised information in a letter received from a parent during the inspection.