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Mrs Tara Ford
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Dear Mrs Ford

Short inspection of Stepgates Community 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 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 and pupils continue to make good progress. It was a real pleasure to meet you, your staff and pupils. Throughout the school and in the specialist centre, pupils are very willing and confident to talk about their learning. They said they especially appreciate the support teachers provide to help them improve, and that 'teachers make learning fun'.

Many changes to leadership and staffing have taken place since the previous inspection. These include several appointments to senior leadership roles, one of which was your own. This has strengthened leadership at the school. Leaders are now much more accountable for the areas that they oversee. You have made sure that your team works together effectively to support the school's continuing improvement.

You have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Leaders, other staff and governors know and understand these well. For example, you have rightly prioritised the need to address and improve pupils' attendance. You have used your knowledge of pupils' starting points to create a detailed improvement plan designed to maximise pupils' progress. The plan focuses accurately on the areas that will develop pupils' language across the curriculum and lead to better outcomes. All staff and governors share your high aspirations for all pupils.

You have a determined focus on improving the education of all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics is accelerating. However, attainment for all groups of pupils remains below the national average at the end of key stages 1 and 2 in reading, writing and mathematics. You have identified correctly that a higher proportion of pupils must reach the expected standards in all subjects in order to be ready for the next stages of their education.

You lead a skilful team that is dedicated to ensuring that all pupils enjoy school and achieve well. Leaders have improved the quality of teaching in the early years and assessment is used sharply to identify children's needs. Many children join the school with starting points that are below those typical for their age, particularly in speech and language. The on-site Nursery class is now part of the school. Adults in the nursery model language well and encourage children to speak clearly and appropriately. As a result, you are now able to ensure that children who join the school from nursery have earlier opportunities to develop their language skills.

Leaders and governors have responded well to the areas for improvement from the previous inspection. The standard of writing has improved across the curriculum. The most able pupils are challenged in mathematics. However, many of the initiatives to raise pupils' understanding to a higher standard are new and have not yet had time to have an impact on the proportion of pupils working at this level.

The governing body is committed to developing the school further. The governors have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the school's priorities for development. They understand the importance of raising pupils' achievement. Governors challenge staff effectively to make sure that they do this. Your regular meetings with governors keep them well informed and ensure that they are able to challenge leaders effectively to make the right improvements to the school. The governing body makes sure that the school's use of extra funding has a positive impact on pupils' well-being and progress.

Parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, value the dedicated way in which the staff team supports pupils to make good academic and social progress. Parents have a high regard for the breadth of the opportunities that the school provides. One parent's comment, typical of many, captured this in recognising that the school is 'a special place with an inclusive policy that has seen our children develop friendships with others across the academic spectrum, incorporating those with learning difficulties and disabilities'.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Records are detailed and of high quality.

All the required checks on staff and volunteers are carried out 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 pupils' safety and well-being. You reinforce important messages about safeguarding through staff meetings and meetings of the governing body. The files you showed me indicate that staff make prompt referrals when they have any concerns. Leaders are tenacious in seeking and pursuing external support for pupils when needed. You and the staff team take great pride in knowing each pupil and their family well. This ensures prompt action, support and guidance should the need arise.

Pupils are confident that staff look after them well. The pupils I spoke with told me that they feel safe at school. They know how to stay safe online. Pupils said that bullying is rare. If it does happen, they have complete confidence in staff to deal with it quickly and effectively. Almost all of the parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire confirmed that their children feel safe.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we agreed to focus on: how effectively leaders are improving the attendance of all pupils, including those from vulnerable groups; how leaders are ensuring that teaching enables pupils, including pupils with SEN and/or disabilities, to reach expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics; and how effectively teaching ensures that disadvantaged pupils make as much progress as they should, especially in reading and mathematics.
- The school provides excellent care and support to vulnerable children and their families. This involves the child protection team and a home-school link worker. However, in recent years, attendance has been below the national average for all groups of pupils and declined further in 2017. In September 2017, you introduced a more rigorous approach to monitoring and addressing pupils' attendance. You have shared your high expectations with parents and you routinely remind them of the importance of regular attendance, for example via the website and through the school's newsletter. The impact of this new approach on pupils' rates of attendance has yet to be seen. However, the number of pupils who are persistently absent from school is starting to reduce.
- This year, the proportion of pupils who met the expected standard in phonics dropped to below the national average. As a result, you have changed the way phonics is taught and raised your expectations of what pupils can achieve. Teaching now ensures that pupils participate well in phonics activities. Extra support is provided quickly for any pupil who needs help to reinforce their understanding. As a result, Reception children's phonics skills are improving and they are increasingly confident when sounding out their own words.
- Pupils in Years 1 and 2 can apply their phonics skills when reading. This good start in reading is built on in key stage 2, where pupils have valuable opportunities to reread and revisit quality texts. Comprehension skills are becoming more developed in Years 5 and 6, because pupils have frequent opportunities to read across the curriculum. Pupils of different abilities are provided with increasingly complex texts and, as a result, they develop their skills while being challenged at an appropriate level.
- Recent changes made to raise standards in writing have included extended

opportunities to write within English and also topic lessons. The introduction of good-quality texts is inspiring and developing pupils' use of more complex language in their writing. Pupils are encouraged to talk about what they want to write, which helps to improve their confidence and fluency when writing. For example, in several classes, pupils were discussing metaphorical language and imagery enthusiastically. This is having a positive impact on the quality of pupils' writing across the curriculum.

- In mathematics, leaders have identified that, to develop secure skills, pupils need experience of reasoning and opportunities to explain their ideas. This is happening very effectively through 'mastery Mondays', when pupils routinely have opportunities to reflect on and discuss their learning. Leaders have also introduced new resources and training for staff. Extra help for those pupils who need it is effective. As a result of these improvements, progress is accelerating for many pupils across the school, particularly in key stage 1. You have made sure that this work is then reinforced at the beginning of key stage 2 through targeted support in lessons, so that pupils' progress is sustained.
- As a result of the measures taken by leaders, current pupils are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics and an increasing proportion are working at the expected standard for their age.
- Each day, and particularly in the afternoons, pupils from the specialist centre are welcomed into mainstream classes and are helped to succeed by their supportive teaching assistants. Pupils with SEN and/or disabilities speak enthusiastically about their learning and are very proud of their work. Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, including those who attend the specialist centre, make good progress from their starting points.
- You give disadvantaged pupils' achievement a high priority. You are ambitious for their future and will not be satisfied until disadvantaged pupils of all abilities achieve their full potential in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6. You are now focusing appropriately on making sure that disadvantaged pupils share your aspirations for their futures and achieve well.
- You check disadvantaged pupils' progress routinely and have direct discussions with teachers about pupils' learning. You and your team look closely at the impact of teaching on disadvantaged pupils' learning and have made a number of improvements. For example, you have introduced 'challenge targets' for pupils to ensure that there is no limit to ambition for pupils. Ongoing developments have ensured that disadvantaged pupils continue to make strong progress in a range of subjects, including reading and mathematics.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- high aspirations and rapid progress are sustained, so that increasing proportions of pupils achieve the expected and higher standards by the end of key stage 2
- recent improvements to the management of attendance lead to a reduction in

the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcia Goodwin
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and senior leaders, the chair and vice chair of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I met with a group of pupils from Years 1 to 6 and spoke with many other pupils informally. I observed learning across the school jointly with you. I looked at examples of pupils' work and spoke with pupils during lessons. I scrutinised a variety of documents, including the school's own evaluation of its performance, records of checks that leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and information relating to attendance. I took account of responses to questionnaires from 93 pupils and 53 staff. I also considered 108 responses from parents to the Ofsted online survey, Parent View, including free-text comments.