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9 February 2018

Mrs Sonia Fenner
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Dear Mrs Fenner

Short inspection of Pirton School

Following my visit to the school on 1 February 2018, 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. In the last two years there have been many changes to the staff team, and the governing body. During this time, your high expectations and determination to improve pupils' achievements have made a positive difference and the pace of improvement has clearly accelerated. Consequently, current pupils are receiving a good and improving education and most are making good progress.

Upon undertaking the role of acting headteacher in the autumn term 2017, you already knew the school very well from your previous role as assistant headteacher. This has helped to ensure a seamless leadership transition. Parents recognise that you are an effective leader. This is evident in the many positive comments made in Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. Parents describe your 'ambitious vision for the school' and the 'fantastic job' you perform leading Pirton School. Parents also appreciate your hard work and dedication, your open communication with them and that you 'care deeply' about all the pupils in the school.

Your determination for continuous improvement and high standards inspires the staff team to strive for the best possible outcomes for pupils' personal and academic achievement. All 18 staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire agreed that the school is led and managed well. Staff enjoy working at the school and feel well supported because there are systems in place to share ideas and plan together.

Changes in the governing body include a new chair and several new governors.

Governors take their roles seriously. Through regular training they ensure that they have a breadth of knowledge and skills to conduct their responsibilities effectively. They are increasingly involved in checking the work of the school and creating plans for future improvements. Governors share your enthusiasm and desire to raise standards further.

The strong relationships and mutual respect between teachers and pupils result in a happy, purposeful atmosphere in classes and around the school. Pupils are very supportive of one another. They told me that they enjoy the opportunities their teachers give them to work together. One pupil informed me that: 'I like working with partners and in groups because you get to know what others are thinking. We share our good ideas and this helps us to learn.' This view was typical. Pupils also enjoy the wide range of after-school and lunchtime clubs, sporting events and trips.

At the time of the previous inspection the school was asked to focus on raising pupils' achievement in mathematics in key stage 2. You and other leaders have attended to this area by providing training for staff and strengthening the curriculum. During the inspection I observed effective teaching in mathematics across key stage 2. In all classes pupils were being encouraged to use and apply their mathematical skills to solve a range of problems and challenges. As a result of your work in this area, pupils now make strong progress and, consequently, achievement in mathematics by the end of key stage 2 is rapidly improving.

Another area for improvement highlighted in the previous inspection was to provide pupils with opportunities to respond to the guidance teachers give them so that pupils can further improve their work. Teachers ensure that pupils have regular advice on how to improve, not only through written comments in books but also during conversations in lessons. From observations in classes and looking at pupils' books I saw that pupils are keen to receive this advice and use it well to make their work even better. Older pupils can explain clearly how they have used this guidance to advance their learning.

You make good use of the support and challenge you receive from the school's improvement adviser. Your self-evaluation accurately identifies the school's strengths and points out where improvements are needed. For example, pupils' achievement in writing is not as strong as in other subjects, and this is a current priority. Individual action plans point to the next steps and the targets that you are working towards.

The period of instability the school has experienced has not been without its setbacks. Published assessment information shows that in 2016 and 2017, pupils' outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics were not consistently good enough across the school because pupils did not make fast enough progress. Additionally, while parents understand about staff changes that occur in a school, they do have concerns that they have sensitively shared with you. You are working positively with parents to ensure that they are reassured and are informed as much as is possible about the school's work.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and governors have ensured that the arrangements to safeguard pupils are fit for purpose. Safeguarding records are detailed and of high quality. All required checks take place when new staff are appointed. Staff are well trained. They receive updates to their training and have regular opportunities to discuss any safeguarding issues.

Safeguarding policies are appropriate and up to date. The governor with responsibility for safeguarding undertakes checks to ensure that safeguarding procedures are consistently applied. You work closely with other professionals and services to ensure that children and families receive timely and effective support.

Pupils are confident that school is a safe place and told me that they can put any worries they have in the class 'worry boxes' or speak with any member of staff. Either way, pupils told me the adults will quickly sort out any concerns they have. They told me that bullying does not happen at Pirton School because, 'we look after each other here'.

Parents also feel reassured that their children are safe and well looked after in the school's 'nurturing environment'.

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 during their time in Reception. This is because, since the previous inspection, published assessments show that although children's outcomes have been improving, in 2017 the proportion of children in the early years who achieved the expected level for children of their age was below the national average.
- You and your leaders took swift action to analyse the results to look for any gaps in children's learning and put necessary steps in place to improve their outcomes. Staff have received additional training and you have also commissioned local authority specialists to support leaders to further improve the quality of teaching and learning in the early years.
- The indoor learning environment is well resourced and equipment is organised so that it is accessible for children to use. I observed children enjoying a range of activities. One group of children were enthusiastically finding and sorting model baby dinosaurs that had 'hatched' from a giant dinosaur's egg. The adults working with the children were effectively modelling language and questioning the children to move their learning forward. From looking at the children's books it is evident that most children are making good progress from their different starting points.
- You acknowledge that staff do not yet make the most of the outdoor learning environment by providing a wide range of stimulating and engaging activities so that children continue to learn as they play. There are too few planned opportunities for children to practise and apply the literacy and number skills they

have been taught when choosing their own activities. Consequently, some children do not attain as highly as they could.

- Another line of enquiry focused on how effectively phonics is taught, and if pupils make good enough progress in this area, from their starting points. The published data shows that although the proportion of pupils that reached the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check is on an upward trend, it has remained below the national average for the last three years.
- You and your leaders are rightly taking effective action to tackle the previous weaknesses in phonics teaching. You are currently reviewing the teaching approaches used across the school with good effect. For example, the phonics lesson we observed together in the Reception class was interactive and fun so the children were interested and enjoying their learning. When I heard a group of key stage 1 pupils read their books they demonstrated a good level of phonic knowledge and were able to use and apply their skills to identify sounds when reading different words.
- Pupils' progress in phonics is closely tracked and targeted support put in place to address any underachievement. This is improving pupils' outcomes. You acknowledge that while your focus on giving additional support to those pupils who need to catch up is effective, expectations are not always high enough for more confident pupils in Reception and key stage 1. For these pupils some phonics sessions do not have sufficient pace and challenge. As a result, not all pupils attain as highly as they could. You are in the process of arranging training for all staff to improve the quality and consistency of phonics teaching further across Reception and key stage 1.
- Finally, I explored how leaders are ensuring that pupils in key stage 1 achieve well in their writing. This is because published assessment information for the past two years shows that pupils in key stage 1 achieved less well in writing than in reading and mathematics.
- Raising standards in pupils' writing is already a focus in your improvement plans. You have provided training for staff and as a result they are more confident about the national writing standards and what pupils need to do to achieve them. For example, they make sure that pupils have a clear understanding of the features of different types of writing and how to plan and organise their work. You and your leaders monitor the teaching in lessons closely to make sure pupils are making strong progress.
- The quality and quantity of work in pupils' books, displays around the school and the school's current assessment information indicate that the teaching of writing in key stage 1 is typically effective over time. Pupils are confident and achieving well in their writing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the outdoor area in the early years is improved by providing more challenging and purposeful opportunities for children to practise and develop their early reading, writing and number skills when choosing their own activities

- the number of pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics screening check by the end of Year 1 continues to increase so it is at least in line with the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Webb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

You and I discussed the lines of enquiry for this inspection, the school's internal evaluation of its performance, plans for future improvement, and information about current pupils' progress and attainment.

Meetings were held with you, some of your senior leaders, and your governors, including the vice chair of the governing body. I also spoke to the school's local authority improvement adviser on the telephone.

I gathered a range of evidence to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This included joint observations with you of teaching and learning in all classes.

We looked at a sample of pupils' current work across all subjects and across a wide range of abilities. I heard some pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 read. I talked to pupils about their reading habits and looked at their reading records. 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 as one of the school's designated safeguarding leads.

The views of 59 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were taken into account, as well as the 53 responses parents made using the free-text service. I also considered the views of the parents I spoke with during the inspection.

I looked at the 18 responses to Ofsted's online staff survey and the 46 responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey.