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Miss Angharad Morris
Headteacher
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Dear Miss Morris

Short inspection of Mary Exton Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 23 January 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 March 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Since the last inspection, there have been three changes of headteacher, resulting in weaknesses in teaching not being identified, especially at key stage 2. This has led to a decline in standards, particularly in writing and in the proportion of pupils working at greater depth in writing and mathematics. There have also been four changes of special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) during the same period. This has contributed to a decline in the progress of the small number of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities across all subjects, and in the progress in writing of disadvantaged pupils due to lack of consistent monitoring. These changes have also led to a loss of confidence in the school of a significant number of parents. The new SENCo has begun to implement promising systems to raise the achievement for these pupils.

The areas for improvement identified at the last inspection had not been effectively addressed. This was due in part to changes in headteacher, staff and governors.

Since your recent appointment, you have worked successfully and are now well on the way to turning the school around with the support of the new senior leadership team and governing body. As a result, your actions in driving improvements forward and raising pupils' achievements are proving to be effective. You have restored staff morale and developed strong team work, focusing sharply on strengthening

monitoring to improve teaching, learning and assessment. Your self-evaluation is accurate, and you have used this to identify the need to raise achievement in writing and mathematics across the school. Leaders are ensuring that the early years provision continues to be good and that children make good progress from their different starting points. The teaching of phonics is a strength of the school and is reflected in the high proportion of pupils in Year 1 reaching the required standard in the phonics screening check for the past three years.

The governing body has been strengthened and is realistic about the school's current effectiveness. Governors are ambitious for the school and are providing effective support and challenge for its work. They visit the school regularly to carry out joint reviews with senior leaders. They have worked closely and successfully with you to restore the confidence of many parents who previously were dissatisfied with the school. This is reflected in the strongly positive views of parents, most of whom would recommend the school to others. One parent wrote: 'This is a fantastic school. My child is very happy at school and is making good progress. The new headteacher is improving the school well.'

Pupils are usually well behaved. Pupils agreed that this is the case. They said they are happy at school. This is reflected in their above average attendance over the past three years. They are improving their attitudes to school and developing more confidence in learning. In most lessons, they listen carefully to teachers, follow instructions and complete their tasks. The curriculum promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well, particularly through opportunities to learn about British values, in well-chosen topics, through everyday routines and in assemblies.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school is providing a safe and secure environment to protect the welfare and interests of pupils effectively. In my discussions with school leaders and governors, it was clear that you are all developing a strong culture for safeguarding.

School policies on child protection and safeguarding are implemented effectively. Your checks on the suitability of staff and visitors to work with pupils are thorough and you carefully assess all potential risks to ensure that pupils stay safe and healthy. Governors are ensuring that all safeguarding requirements are met and all training is up to date.

The school has a very welcoming atmosphere. Parents, pupils and staff all agreed that bullying is rare. Pupils play safely. They follow the rules of fair play in team sports, and handle equipment, including computers, carefully. Pupils move around the school in a sensible manner. They learn how to use the internet safely and have a good understanding of the potential dangers of misusing social media sites. Pupils said they feel safe and parents and staff agreed with this.

Inspection findings

- I wanted to see how well pupils were achieving in writing across the school. Your evaluation accurately shows that, while pupils currently at the school are making better progress in writing than pupils did in 2016, their progress in writing is not as strong as their progress in other subjects. Pupils' written work, and visits to lessons, show that sometimes work is not pitched at a high enough level to enable pupils to make rapid gains in writing. At other times, tasks are too difficult for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, which limits their progress. Your accurate data, pupils' work over time and visits to lessons show that there is some inconsistency in the progress that pupils are making in writing in different classes.
- My next line of enquiry was to determine how effectively teachers are challenging and supporting pupils to work at greater depth in mathematics. Your data for current pupils shows that there has been a steady increase in the proportion of pupils working at greater depth. However, this is not consistent across all year groups. In some cases, expectations for learning are too low. Pupils are not challenged enough to work at greater depth and do not develop their reasoning skills sufficiently. Sometimes all pupils are given the same work to do. This does not extend their learning sufficiently. Teachers are not consistently challenging pupils to achieve as highly as they could.
- I also wanted to understand the effect of the work of leaders on different subject areas and groups of pupils. In particular, I wanted to find out how well provision was being led for writing and mathematics, and for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, or who are disadvantaged. Your self-evaluation shows that you have rightly made these areas priorities for improvement.
- Currently, subject leadership for writing and mathematics is shared between senior leaders. This is not securing consistently strong outcomes for pupils. The school rightly plans to develop the role of subject leaders in order for them to improve standards. This is because the understanding of, and challenge to, the quality of teaching across a range of subjects is not yet fully established.
- Leaders have recently introduced new systems for improving the progress of disadvantaged pupils and for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. These have not yet had time to be effective.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils across the school make at least the progress expected for their ages in writing
- teachers consistently challenge pupils to work at greater depth in mathematics
- the role of subject leaders is developed to oversee and secure the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress
- new strategies raise the achievement of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, and of disadvantaged pupils, by the summer term 2018.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the regional schools

commissioner and the director of children's services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Declan McCarthy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I held meetings with you, senior leaders, and three governors during this inspection. I also held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. I conducted joint visits to lessons across the school, including the early years, with senior leaders. I looked at samples of pupils' work and heard pupils read their own written work in lessons. I also talked to them about their learning. I met with pupils informally at lunchtime to seek their views of the school and also considered the written questionnaire returns they produced during the inspection. I sought the views of parents by considering the 78 responses to Ofsted's electronic survey, Parent View, alongside the 66 text responses. I met with 32 parents who were collecting their children from school. I also took account of the three online questionnaire responses from staff, along with the 17 handwritten responses during the inspection. I looked at a range of documentation, including policies and procedures relating to safeguarding, your self-evaluation document and school improvement plan, attendance figures, samples of risk assessments, vetting procedures and records of training in safeguarding.