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Mr David Cole and Mrs Gill Jones
Acting co-headteachers
Seven Fields Primary School
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Dear Mr Cole and Mrs Jones

Short inspection of Seven Fields Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 26 April 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 your predecessor 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.**

You have very recently started a co-headship, following the retirement of the previous substantive headteacher in March 2018. The recruitment process for that post led to considerable turmoil among trustees and some staff. This promoted an unhappy climate and the resignation of the former board in its entirety. Following the direct intervention of the regional schools commissioner, the school now has a fully reconstituted board in place. The board has the personnel with the right skills, knowledge and experience to take the school forward. However, this has caused some disruption to your improvement work, especially by distracting leaders from their core business of improving teaching, learning and assessment.

You have an improving group of leaders, including middle leaders, whose increasing skills, knowledge and confidence are benefiting the school. Through your work, and in their development, there is the capacity to improve. For example, phase leaders are instrumental in monitoring standards in English and mathematics. However, you understand that leaders' work has not had the precision required to improve some fundamental aspects of the school's performance, such as phonics. In addition, some key leadership roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined. This leads to uncertainty and slows the rate of improvement in key aspects of the school's work. Overall, however, the quality of teaching has remained stable. Pupils make strong

progress in reading, writing and mathematics by the time they leave the school in Year 6. They enjoy participating in lessons and have positive attitudes to learning. The majority of parents are pleased with the quality of care and education provided. In fact, parents told me that 'this is a really good school' and '[my child] receives brilliant support!'

We worked together to identify key areas which leaders must remedy before the next inspection. Currently leaders' lack of clarity around key roles and responsibilities reduces the rate of improvement, especially in phonics. Another significant weakness includes the strategy for teaching phonics, especially in key stage 1. Outcomes in the phonics screening check remain stubbornly low, with little sign of improvement. Finally, your work to improve pupils' attendance and reduce the persistently high absence of too many pupils is not working well enough. You have dedicated support staff who monitor this regularly. However, a lack of vital support and challenge from senior leaders fails to give this area the importance it deserves. This means that too many pupils, especially those who are vulnerable, continue to miss too much of their education.

Safeguarding is effective.

You work well with other staff to ensure that safeguarding is of the highest importance. In particular, the work of the safeguarding leader/deputy head is impressive. You ensure that staff are kept fully trained and aware of the latest training and guidance to keep pupils safe. As a result, all staff are vigilant and know how to look after pupils in a range of situations. Any concerns raised by staff are immediately dealt with through effective and timely actions of dedicated leaders. You work well with a range of external agencies and health providers to ensure that pupils are fully supported. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are robust, including pre-employment checks and vetting procedures.

Pupils say that they enjoy school and feel safe. They know what bullying is and feel this is not prevalent in the school. Pupils told me that rare cases of bullying or anti-social behaviour are often dealt with quickly. Pupils are aware of how to stay safe in a variety of situations, such as when working on the internet. They also know what to do in the event of fire at school. You also ensure that pupils are taught about other dangers to be well prepared for life beyond the school. For example, Year 6 pupils told me about recent railway safety awareness training, which they enjoyed.

Inspection findings

- My first key line of enquiry focused on the impact of leaders' work to improve pupils' phonics skills and knowledge. You have already recognised that this is an area of weakness. You have started to work with external partners in an attempt to improve phonics. To these ends, phonics is taught every day and pupils enjoy the various games and activities in these sessions. However, leaders lack a clear vision and rationale for what high-quality phonics teaching is. This leads to some fundamental issues, particularly in how teachers use assessment information to plan the right next steps to help pupils make good progress. As a result, some

pupils are held back because they lack the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to use and apply phonics at an age-appropriate level.

- Leadership of phonics is not strong. It lacks clear focus and direction. Consequently, issues with phonics teaching are not being identified or addressed quickly. For example, pupils' reading books do not always match their phonics knowledge closely enough, because teachers lack the subject knowledge to know how to check this. In addition, beyond using 'letters and sounds' as a framework, there is not a clear or detailed progression map to help guide teachers in structuring or organising phonics learning.
- However, teachers do assess pupils' reading and use this information to put pupils in different groups to support them. Teaching assistants play a valuable role in working with small groups of pupils. In the early years, including the Nursery, children enjoy being taught their letters and sounds, including some 'tricky words' in Reception. This is serving them well.
- The second key line of enquiry evaluated the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the early years. This is because, despite ongoing improvements, children's outcomes (especially in reading and writing) are consistently below the national average by the time they leave the Reception Year. The learning environment is well presented, with a range of appropriate activities to stimulate and engage the children. Children practise telling stories, for example 'Goldilocks', and enjoy rehearsing rhymes and singing songs. This helps them to understand patterns in language and to develop key listening, language and communication skills. As a result, children make strong progress, often from low starting points, and start catching up well by the end of their Reception Year.
- Staff know the children well and interact meaningfully with them. There are positive relationships so that children feel confident to try new things, including looking through books or writing independently. You have rightly identified, however, that more can still be done to raise achievement for boys in reading.
- We also agreed to briefly consider what was behind the slight 'dip' in key stage 2 mathematics outcomes in 2017. Teachers have been proactive in introducing some school-wide professional development and training into their daily mathematics practice. This is ensuring that outcomes are improving. For example, the focused work on using and applying different methods of calculation in problem-solving is supporting pupils well. Furthermore, increased pupil involvement in having a dialogue with teachers to justify their thinking and reasoning is improving pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding. However, as we discussed, there are still too few pupils reaching the highest standards and achieving greater depth.
- Finally, as part of a safeguarding key line of enquiry, we analysed pupils' attendance and exclusions. Absence remains too high, including for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those who are disadvantaged. In addition, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is also in the highest 10% of schools. You have individuals, including an education welfare officer, who monitor absence on a regular basis and who take the appropriate actions to raise this with parents and carers. However, too often leaders abdicate this responsibility and do not take a strong enough lead to

intervene directly. This reduces the impact of exclusion strategies on behalf of pupils.

- Leaders do not manage or evaluate exclusion strategies well enough. As a result, some pupils remain at risk of repeated exclusions. Leaders ensure that the exclusion policy is followed. However, poor management of exclusions means that some pupils do not receive the high-quality care and focus to which they are entitled. For example, reintegration meetings or ensuing personal support plans do not ensure that pupils benefit strongly from any reasonable adjustments.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school's strategic leadership, including clear roles and responsibilities, is fully resolved to be able to tackle current weaknesses
- the intent, implementation and impact of the school's phonics strategy is reviewed urgently to improve pupils' phonics skills, knowledge and understanding
- attendance is improved, especially for those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and for disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Stewart Gale
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I worked extensively with you both, including visiting some pertinent lessons for the key lines of enquiry and completing a learning walk for phonics. I also spoke with pupils during parts of lessons and listened to some children in Year 1 read. I scrutinised safeguarding records and we discussed a wide range of related matters, including staff recruitment, training and vetting arrangements. I spoke to pupils and staff about their views of safeguarding and met with the designated safeguarding lead. I also spoke with the local authority designated officer.

I met the chair of the board of directors and held a telephone conversation with the chair of the members' board. I reviewed a range of school documents, including the school's self-evaluation summary, headteacher's reports, governors' minutes and phase leaders' monitoring. Although there were only three responses on Parent View, I also took full account of the school's previous survey which was completed

in March 2018 and spoke with parents at the start of the inspection to gather their views. I also considered the 28 responses of staff to the survey provided for the inspection.