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Mrs Cathy Cox
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Dear Mrs Cox

Short inspection of Highwood Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 21 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Everyone connected to Highwood Primary School will know how much this statement means. The school has recently experienced a series of tragic and unexpected events, including a devastating flood in June 2016. Almost 18 months later, everyday school life is not yet back to normal. Pupils do not have access to their usual outdoor areas because contractors are still working on the drainage. The events of 2016/17 have severely tested the school's maxim, 'promoting resilience, achieving potential'. It is hugely to the credit of governors, staff, pupils and parents that the school has maintained and enhanced the quality of its provision during this most challenging period.

Your leadership over the last 12 months has been remarkable. Staff morale has remained high, and the universally positive survey responses from staff on this inspection reflect their complete confidence in your leadership and management of the school. Everyone's work-life balance has been severely tested by the recent upheavals, but staff say that leaders take workload into account, citing the recent revisions to the marking policy as a good example of reducing unnecessary burdens.

Leaders remain committed to making Highwood an outstanding school, but they are also determined to retain its strongly inclusive character, ensuring that the school

meets the diverse needs of local families. One distinctive feature of your school is its strong emphasis on pupils' welfare. Having a dedicated welfare officer has enabled the school to provide effective support for children who are potentially vulnerable and for families that are susceptible to disengagement from education. The school is proactive in successfully averting problems and in supporting positive engagement, rather than simply reacting to events when they happen.

Pupils achieve well at Highwood. By the age of 11, standards are at least in line with those seen nationally and often above average. Standards in reading are a notable strength. In 2017, the proportion of Year 6 pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics was above the national figure. This was a marked improvement on the 2016 results, when pupils' progress in mathematics lagged behind other subjects. Across the school, leaders know precisely where improvements can be made because they keep a close eye on assessment information and the quality of teaching. There is a sharp focus on the progress and achievement of different groups, ensuring that individual pupils catch up quickly if they start to fall behind. Where a subject or year group is doing less well, leaders quickly intervene to support improvement.

Parents are very positive about the school. Since September, nine out of 10 parents who have responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, say that they would recommend the school, and responses in the questionnaire reflect this picture. In their free-text comments in the parental questionnaire, most praised the school and said how much their children enjoy attending. Many were lavish in their commendations for the 'amazing staff' who 'go to great lengths' to support their children. A few parents drew attention to their specific concerns. However, it is clear that the school is aware of these and deals quickly and appropriately with any issues raised.

Pupils are particularly enthusiastic about their school, and have taken the recent disruptions in their stride. The older pupils who are 'ambassadors', such as those who support younger pupils with their reading, take their roles seriously and really enjoy their responsibilities. In lessons and around the site, pupils are lively but also considerate and well behaved. They enjoy their different subjects and the wider opportunities to join in extra-curricular activities, including sport and music. Adults skilfully support and manage individual pupils who struggle to conform to the school's high expectations.

Since the last inspection, leaders have successfully maintained and improved the quality of teaching across the school, despite staff changes and planned absences. You closely monitor the quality of teaching and make careful decisions about how best to deploy the expertise of your teachers and teaching assistants. This maximises their effectiveness and ensures that individual staff develop their practice and support one another.

Governors are well informed, highly committed, and share your high aspirations for the school. They have a good balance of desirable skills and essential experience that enables them to quickly grasp information and efficiently fulfil their

responsibilities. The governing body has had to provide considerable additional support during the last 18 months, but governors have not ducked the need to question and challenge senior leaders during this difficult period.

External support for the school, from local consultants, has been well focused and constructive, and has helped to keep the school on track during this turbulent period and also to strengthen key aspects of provision.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, are thorough in ensuring that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding have up-to-date training and ensure that staff are also suitably trained. Staff are alert to the possible risks and vulnerabilities of individual pupils, and work hard to support children and families. Procedures for referring concerns are efficient and carefully documented, and appropriately involve external agencies. The school's records are detailed and meticulously maintained.

Pupils say that they feel safe in school and are confident that, if they have any concerns, they can share these with an adult. Pupils have an age-appropriate understanding of how to stay safe, including online. A very large majority of the 98 parents who responded to Parent View agree that their children feel safe and are well looked after.

Inspection findings

- Pupils at Highwood come from diverse backgrounds and a range of different starting points. Although pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve well by the age of 11, there is some variability in their learning and progress across the school. We agreed that I would focus on these specific aspects to see what success the school has had in improving provision.
- Your self-evaluation of the school's strengths and priorities is honest and accurate. You acknowledge that the school could do more to increase the numbers of pupils reaching greater depth and the higher standards at the end of key stages 1 and 2. My focus on these priorities was no surprise, and you were able to provide ample first-hand evidence of the effectiveness of the school's work to strengthen these outcomes.
- The teaching of mathematics has been comprehensively reviewed and strengthened, with a view to improving pupils' progress and attainment in key stage 2. Initiatives include starting mathematics lessons with a 'four operations' exercise to develop pupils' mental agility, and setting tasks that are concrete, pictorial or abstract, depending on pupils' level of understanding. The positive impact of these new approaches can be seen in pupils' learning in the classroom and in their written work, as well as in better national test results in 2017.
- Most children in the early years get off to a good start, but outcomes at the end of Reception have lagged behind national figures over the last three years because too few boys reach the expected standards in reading or writing.

Although pupils catch up quickly when they move into Year 1, particularly in their phonics and reading, leaders recognise that more could be done to accelerate children's progress in Reception. Observations of teaching and learning in Reception indicate that adult-led work is pitched at an appropriate level, but there is insufficient focus on the aspects of literacy that need to improve.

- You have taken effective steps to ensure that the most able pupils are stretched in their mathematics and English work. For example, in mathematics, rather than having predetermined ability groups with allocated tasks, pupils select different levels of challenge when working independently. Evidence from lesson observations, talking to pupils and seeing their work shows that this improves the level of challenge because pupils select wisely to extend their learning.
- You have only very recently been appointed to the substantive headteacher post, having previously assumed this role on an interim basis. You have already taken steps to develop wider leadership roles and responsibilities across the school so that improvement is steered more systematically. You recognise that ensuring that pupils experience a rich curriculum across all areas of learning, and are stretched in all subjects, is a key priority. Staff are rising to this challenge, but strong and influential subject leadership is at an early stage of development.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- teaching and learning in the early years are more sharply focused to enable pupils, particularly boys, to achieve at least age-expected standards in reading and writing
- more pupils work at a greater depth and achieve the higher standard of attainment by ages seven and 11
- the leadership roles of middle and senior leaders are developed so that teaching and learning flourish across all areas of the curriculum.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and your two assistant headteachers to discuss progress since the previous inspection and to agree the key lines of enquiry for the inspection. I spoke informally to staff and pupils, and held a series of formal meetings with a group of pupils, three middle leaders, four governors, including the chair, and a representative from the local authority.

I reviewed a wide range of information provided, including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans and progress reviews. I scrutinised the school's safeguarding, staff recruitment and child protection procedures. We visited lessons and looked at pupils' work in most classes across the school. I also looked at 77 responses to Parent View, and 44 staff survey returns.