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Mrs Zoe Linnington  
Federation Headteacher  
Northhill CofE VA Lower School  
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Dear Mrs Linnington

### **Short inspection of Northhill CofE VA Lower School**

Following my visit to the school on 5 July 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 November 2014.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection, in spite of considerable changes in staff and leaders. Governors made a decision to appoint a head of school following the departure of the headteacher who was in post during the previous inspection. You took up your position as headteacher of the federation in January 2017. The head of school resigned in February 2018 and you were unable to recruit a full-time replacement. There was a period in the spring and summer 2018 when there was no head of school until an interim head of school joined you in May 2018. Governors have been successful in appointing a permanent head of school from September 2018. You have reorganised many roles and responsibilities as a result of all of the changes. New leaders of English and mathematics, and a dedicated lead for monitoring attendance, have recently begun their roles.

You and your staff have continued to inspire pupils by ensuring that the school's curriculum is engaging and well taught. It promotes the school's values. Pupils are proud to be a part of Northhill and enjoy the responsibilities they are given as members of the school council or ambassadors. The school is bright and welcoming. Displays, at almost every turn, show the diverse experiences that pupils are offered, from exploring famous artists like Matisse to producing their own art work. You and your staff effectively use the wide experiences of pupils from different countries to learn from and about one another, creating a harmonious school community. 'We may be all be different, but we can still play together,' said one pupil. Those pupils who are new to the school, some of whom speak English as an additional language,

are warmly welcomed. This ensures that they thrive and make good progress. As one parent commented on Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, 'The staff work very hard to settle new pupils at the school and provide a positive learning environment.'

At the previous inspection, leaders were asked to improve teaching and learning, particularly in Years 3 and 4. The inspection report also highlighted that pupils were not challenged to achieve as well as they might, and that the learning environment in the early years was not used as well as it could be. Since you have been in post, you have ensured that the whole-school focus has been on improving teaching and learning to become consistently good. That is because you and your staff have high expectations of what pupils can and will achieve.

Outcomes at the end of the summer 2017 improved on 2016 in almost all measures. Confidence of parents in your leadership, despite some challenges in the school's recent history, is strong. All of those who responded to the Parent View survey said they would recommend the school. Governors have wholeheartedly supported you in monitoring how well the school is doing. They effectively hold you to account for pupils' progress and attainment. You all know the school and its families very well.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Leaders and governors have ensured that arrangements for safeguarding are fit for purpose. There is strong emphasis on safeguarding and child protection. All staff are vigilant and know well how to report any concerns they have. Staff receive appropriate training, including 'Prevent' duty training, so that they understand how to keep pupils safe. Your new designated safeguarding leader provides regular updates to keep staff well informed. Child protection records are well maintained and identify actions taken to address concerns. The governor with responsibility for safeguarding makes regular checks of the procedures regarding the suitability of staff to work with children. All relevant processes are followed when recruiting new staff.

Pupils understand about keeping themselves safe and know who to approach if they are worried about anything. Your staff teach pupils how to keep themselves safe when online and you provide parents with useful information about the dangers of the internet. Pupils said that they feel safe in their 'fun, fantastic and friendly' school. They are confident that adults will do all that they can to ensure their welfare and well-being. Parents agree that their children are safe at school and well cared for. As one parent said, 'Northill school, children and teachers are lovely. My child is in a happy, secure learning environment.'

### **Inspection findings**

- The first line of enquiry related to what leaders are doing to improve pupils' attendance and to reduce persistent absence. This is because pupils' attendance has been below the national average for some years, particularly for boys and

disadvantaged pupils. Persistent absence has fluctuated since the previous inspection.

- Improving attendance is a key priority on the school's improvement plan. Governors have given specific responsibility for attendance to an experienced higher-level teaching assistant. This member of staff works closely with the local authority attendance officer to ensure that the school has a rigorous procedure for managing poor attendance.
- The first-day-calling procedure is rigorously carried out by the office manager. The school's attendance officer monitors closely those pupils whose attendance is below 85%. She supports families and pupils by, for example, offering free attendance at the school's breakfast club. Some parents of disadvantaged pupils have taken up this offer and there are examples of individuals' attendance improving. The governing body has taken a strong line with parents, fining those who have not responded to written communication about their children's attendance, or who have not taken up support from the school.
- During the inspection we discussed some of the pupils who are persistently absent, for which there are very good reasons. You work closely with the local authority representative for the Traveller community to ensure that the school provides work for pupils who are absent from school for long periods of time. Some of these pupils are also disadvantaged and/or have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. You recognise that with such small numbers each pupil's absence affects overall figures considerably. You and your team work hard to improve pupils' attendance so that it is at least in line with the national average.
- The second key line of enquiry related to the quality of teaching and learning in key stage 2, particularly in reading, but not exclusively so. This is because this was an identified area for improvement in the previous inspection.
- Together, we observed learning in Years 3 and 4. Pupils were actively engaged and keen to take part in the lessons. Work in pupils' books show that they are at least on track to achieve the expected standard by the end of Year 6. We saw many examples of pupils working above what is typical for their age group and achieving greater depth in their writing and mathematics.
- The school's own assessment information shows that a large proportion of pupils in Years 3 and 4 make good progress from their various starting points in reading, writing and mathematics. That is because teaching is well planned and exciting. Pupils are offered appropriate challenge with support from well-deployed adults. The breadth of pupils' reading is clearly influencing how they write. Many pieces of work showed that their work would not be out of place in Years 5 and 6.
- The English subject leader is a very good role model for other members of staff. He has reorganised how guided reading takes place, trialling the use of text as a whole class. This has clearly had an impact. Pupils across the school say they 'love reading'. As one pupil said, 'The books I choose are so exciting I can't wait to see what happens next.'
- In 2017, pupils at the end of key stage 1 achieved above the national average in

reading at both the expected standard and greater depth. Pupils achieved above the national average in the phonics check at the end of Year 1 in 2017. Pupils read with confidence in Year 1. They use their phonic knowledge well to help them read with fluency. They tackle 'tricky' words without fuss.

- During the inspection, we observed pupils enjoying their learning. They are offered a wide range of first-hand experiences to ensure that they take part and contribute in lessons, which they do readily. However, in key stage 1, the quality of the work that they produce following such activities varies, because teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve vary.
- Pupils in key stage 1 do not always achieve as well as they should from the end of the early years. Although some challenge is clearly offered to pupils in reading and mathematics and some are eager to accept that challenge, pupils are not progressing as well in writing. They are not offered regular opportunities to write at length in English and across the curriculum. As a consequence, they do not apply their basic English skills well in their writing, nor do they use their reading experience in their writing.
- My third line of enquiry related to how well leaders ensure that the indoor and outdoor learning spaces in the Reception Year support children's learning. This was an area for development identified in the previous inspection report.
- Children in the early years are currently taught alongside Year 1 pupils. The learning environment is bright and interesting and promotes all areas of the early years curriculum. Teaching is very well planned so that each child's experiences and interests are taken into account. For example, during the inspection children eagerly awaited the emergence of a butterfly from its cocoon. Children move confidently from one activity to the next, with many spending prolonged periods of time, for example, examining fruits, drawing them and printing patterns.
- Adults in the early years are adept at gently probing children's curiosity. They take every opportunity to question children subtly about what they notice. For example, children were pouring colourful gel beads from one container to another. 'What do you notice about these beads?' asked the teaching assistant. Children showed their grasp of descriptive language while also challenging others to 'see how many you can get in this cup because they are so bouncy'.
- The children's learning journals show a wide range of first-hand experiences which demonstrate the good progress they have made from often low starting points. Activities are selected to develop fine and gross motor skills, both of which have clearly improved since children joined the school. You offer a good range of activities outside of the well-organised classroom to develop early writing and number skills. During the inspection, children were keen to show what they had written, often independently.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils in key stage 1, make as much progress as they should in writing from their starting points, and are given regular opportunities to practise their basic English skills

- the attendance of the small number of pupils with persistent absence improves so that overall attendance at least matches the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During this inspection, I met with you, your interim head of school, the designated lead for safeguarding and the English leader. I met with your interim head of school and you to discuss attendance. I met with three governors including the chair and vice chair of the governing body. I spoke to a representative of the local authority. I met with a group of 10 pupils and spoke informally with pupils during lessons. I visited classes with you, where I observed teaching and learning and looked at pupils' work. I carried out a book scrutiny of pupils' books from across different subjects with you, your interim head of school and the English subject leader.

I took into account 21 free-text responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire. I also considered three responses to the online staff questionnaire. I looked at a range of documentation, including the school's own assessment information, self-evaluation and development plan. I evaluated safeguarding procedures, including policies to keep pupils safe, staff training records, safeguarding checks and attendance information. I undertook a review of the school's website.