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Mrs Clare Pankhania
Headteacher
Highworth Combined School and Nursery
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Dear Mrs Pankhania

Short inspection of Highworth Combined School and Nursery

Following my visit to the school on 26 September 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. Since your appointment as headteacher in April 2017, you, other leaders and governors have effectively managed a number of changes including restructuring the leadership team. You have also reversed a deficit budget, so the school is financially sustainable.

You have rightly paid sharp attention to improving pupils' outcomes, while maintaining the high-quality pastoral care which is a feature of the school. The values of curiosity, achievement, resilience and relationships continue to be embedded in the curriculum and pupils' approach to learning. You have sensibly prioritised staff development and 'buy-in' for the changes you have made. Consequently, although you have had much to do to ensure that the school remains good, staff, pupil and parent morale continues to be high.

Relationships are very strong and there is mutual respect between pupils and adults. The high levels of care are recognised and appreciated by parents. One parent commented: 'Members of staff are fantastic; they put the well-being and the education of the children first.'

Pupils are proud of their school, are well mannered and enjoy their learning. You and your team create an environment which is inclusive and tolerant, and where pupils learn without discrimination. As a result, pupils are happy and feel secure. You have successfully increased attendance rates since you joined the school. However, attendance still remains below the national average and too many pupils

are still persistently absent.

In the previous inspection, inspectors highlighted the following strengths: good teaching; the quality of support given to pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities; positive relationships and effective leadership. These strengths have been maintained. Leaders were asked to improve the quality of teaching in writing to raise pupils' achievement. The teaching of writing has improved and pupils are now making better progress across the school. You have achieved this by having a whole-school approach to writing that focuses on higher expectations of what pupils can achieve in lessons. Pupils have opportunities to apply their writing skills in other subjects such as history and geography. Although writing is improving, you recognise that there are still inconsistencies in teachers' expectations.

Attainment in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stages 1 and 2 dipped below national figures in 2017. The most recent assessment information for Year 2 and Year 6 shows that standards are improving to catch up with the national picture. Across the school, current pupils' work and the school's own assessment information show that pupils are making good progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school, so pupils are safe and secure. The well-developed policies and procedures are reviewed regularly to ensure that governors have the most up-to-date information and hold staff effectively to account. Record-keeping is robust and appropriate actions are taken to make sure all concerns are followed up swiftly. Comprehensive procedures for the employment of staff ensure that all staff are properly vetted before they work in the school. The school works very well with outside agencies to make sure families and pupils get the help they need.

Parents, staff and pupils agree that Highworth is a safe and secure place to learn. There are extensive child protection induction arrangements for new staff and annual refresher training for all staff. As a result, staff take the right action when concerns arise. All welfare requirements for younger children are effectively met. One pupil made the following comment: 'Teachers and adults make you feel safe. They always know what to do and how to make you feel better.'

Inspection findings

- At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed to review boys' achievement in writing; action taken to raise standards; the effectiveness of work to improve attendance and the effectiveness of teaching and learning in phonics.
- My first line of enquiry focused on what the school does to ensure that boys make the same progress in writing as girls. This is because the difference between boys' and girls' attainment has historically been greater than in other schools nationally. You provided robust evidence to show that typically boys join the school with lower starting points, particularly in writing, than girls.

- Boys across the school demonstrate the same positive attitudes to writing as girls. They produce similar quantities of work and discuss their writing with enthusiasm and enjoyment. Over time, the actions you are taking to improve boys' progress are paying off. These actions include focusing on simple sentence construction and introducing more complex vocabulary. Year 6 writing assessments demonstrate that boys are now catching up by the time they leave the school.
- The second line of enquiry was to consider how successfully you are raising standards within the school. Alongside your checks on how well pupils are learning, you have rightly developed teaching in order to raise attainment. You carefully check the quality of teaching and provide teachers with relevant, well-considered feedback. This is helping teachers to improve their practice.
- You track pupils' progress accurately, hold meetings with each teacher to identify any pupils who are at risk of falling behind, and put in place a wide range of effective interventions to ensure that those pupils catch up. All this work is contributing to improving outcomes.
- Standards in Year 2 in 2018, although still below standards in other schools nationally, improved greatly compared to 2017. Year 6 results also improved in 2018 and were broadly in line with national averages. Current pupils are making good progress from their different starting points, indicating the success of your endeavours. However, there continue to be some variances in teachers' expectations, particularly of what pupils can achieve in writing.
- I considered what you are doing to improve attendance, which was below that in other schools across the country. Your actions to make sure pupils attend school regularly are effective and attendance is now much closer to the national average. Leaders meet parents to agree what would support their children to get to school, follow up robustly when pupils are absent, and celebrate when pupils' attendance is high. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is falling. However, you rightly acknowledge that this is an important area for the school to develop further.
- My final line of enquiry focused on the actions taken by leaders to improve pupils' outcomes in phonics. This was because outcomes in phonics have been inconsistent and were below the national average in 2017. Staff have undergone training in phonics and the way phonics is delivered has been reorganised to better meet individual pupils' needs. These actions are having a very positive effect and current pupils are making good progress in their phonics. Phonics outcomes improved to be close to the national average in 2018. Assessment information, confirmed by work seen in books, shows that current Year 1 pupils are on track to maintain these standards.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve, particularly in writing, so that standards continue to improve and are at least in line with the national average
- pupils' attendance continues to improve, so that the percentage is above the national average and persistent absence continues to be challenged.

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

Yours sincerely

William James
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, your leadership team and several members of staff. We reviewed your management structure and the improvements which have been made since the previous inspection. Together, we visited several lessons to observe learning. I examined pupils' work focusing on boys' writing. I held a meeting with eight governors, including the chair. I undertook a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. Prior to the inspection, I examined a variety of documents relating to the school. These included published performance information, a copy of your school's self-evaluation document and the school's website. I took into account 85 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I also considered 33 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. I considered a range of documentation including documents relating to safeguarding and governance. I also met with a group of pupils to discuss their learning and views about the school.