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Mr Nick Sheeran
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Dear Mr Sheeran

Short inspection of Birkdale Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 November 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.

This school continues to be good.

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

During my visit, it was clear that the school's aim of 'Attainment through Caring, Challenge and Creativity' aptly sums up its ethos. An air of excitement, fun and enjoyment of learning characterises the school. In no small part, this is due to your enthusiasm and commitment to ensuring that pupils have interesting and memorable learning experiences. Many parents commented on this feature and paid tribute to the work that you and your staff do to educate, nurture and inspire their children. Pupils themselves are the school's biggest fans. Many were bursting to tell me about all the extraordinary things that happen. 'One minute we're working with an archaeologist, the next a plane has landed on the playground or someone from history has come out of the Tardis,' is typical of pupils' comments that capture the spirit of learning at Birkdale. All the staff who responded to Ofsted's online survey said that they are proud to work at your school. Staff agree that leaders consider their well-being and encourage them to improve through support and training. This makes for happy and effective staff who have a very positive effect on pupils' academic and personal development.

Effective teaching and a broad curriculum, including 'life lessons', ensure that pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain and ready for secondary school when they leave Year 6. At that point, pupils have made strong progress in reading and mathematics and their attainment in these subjects is high. During our visits to key

stage 2 classes, we saw some very effective teaching of reading. Teachers used well-crafted questions to extend pupils' vocabulary and develop their inference skills. Teachers required pupils to justify their answers using evidence from the texts. Texts are thoughtfully chosen to motivate pupils, develop their understanding of ideas about equality and diversity and increase their knowledge of a variety of subjects. The text about The Unknown Warrior was an excellent example of pupils' reading skills and historical knowledge being developed at the same time.

Pupils do not achieve as well in writing, but the situation is improving. In 2016, Year 6 pupils' progress in writing was weak and attainment was significantly below average. Since then, however, you and your staff have worked successfully to improve progress and raise attainment so that it is now in line with the national average. Although writing is not now the school's main priority for improvement, you are not content to relax your efforts. Writing most definitely remains on the radar to ensure that pupils achieve as well in this area as they do in reading and mathematics.

Children in the Nursery and Reception classes thoroughly enjoy school. It is clear from the way the children conduct themselves that they feel safe and secure. The proportion of children who attain a good level of development by the end of Reception has improved significantly over the last two years, and is now above average. In the same period, pupils' attainment by the end of Year 2 improved in reading, writing and mathematics. Standards in mathematics are now slightly above average and standards in reading are much closer to the national average. In writing, however, standards are still below average. Teachers in the early years and key stage 1 are rightly focusing on further improving standards in reading and writing. However, weaknesses in the curriculum and teaching of phonics are hampering improvement.

You have taken effective action to deal with the areas for improvement raised by the previous inspection. Curriculum plans reflect your strong commitment to the most able pupils having opportunities to deepen their learning. Higher proportions of pupils attaining the higher standard in reading and mathematics by the end of key stage 2 demonstrate this improvement. Even in writing, where progress is not as good, the proportion of Year 6 pupils attaining greater depth in their writing was slightly above average this year. Since the last inspection, comprehensive training for teaching assistants and more thoughtful deployment of these staff are ensuring that they make a more consistent contribution to teaching and learning. However, some support staff are not being used as well as they might be in the teaching of phonics.

Governors are loyal and dedicated and are great advocates for the school. The introduction of a governors' open day this year has given governors a deeper insight into the school's work. In my discussion with governors and review of the minutes of their meetings, it was clear that they regularly ask leaders probing questions about important matters regarding finance and the school building. However, governors' questions about pupils' achievement are less frequent and searching. You have rightly identified this as a priority for improvement.

Parents' and pupils' views on behaviour are extremely positive. Pupils explained the five 'Bee Rules' that make up your school's code of conduct. They consider the system to be fair and particularly like gaining points from the positive reward system: 'You've been spotted'. The pupils I spoke with said that bullying is rare and knew to confide in a teacher or other trusted adult if they experienced bullying or knew it was happening to someone else. Almost all the pupils who responded to Ofsted's online pupil questionnaire said that teachers are very effective in resolving any bullying that occurs. The behaviour records you keep show that you take incidents of poor behaviour seriously. Many pupils and parents refer to the school community as 'one big happy family', and this was certainly the view I gained during my visit.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff, governors and everyone who works with pupils are thoroughly vetted to ensure their suitability. You ensure that all staff are trained in all aspects of child protection. All the staff I spoke to were clear about what to do if they are concerned about a pupil's safety or welfare, and of how to respond if pupils disclose safeguarding issues to them.

School records show that you are vigilant in following up staff concerns, and that you refer these to specialist agencies if needed. You respect and are guided by the advice of other professionals. However, if necessary, you will persist in pursuing skilled support and intervention to keep vulnerable pupils safe.

Inspection findings

- In each of the last three years, the proportions of pupils attaining the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check have been below average. Some pupils make up lost ground during Year 2, but not enough. Where pupils do not have these skills on beginning Year 3, it limits the extent to which they can develop their understanding of what they read and their ability to write down what they want to say.
- There is some good teaching of phonics. However, across the early years and key stage 1 there are inconsistencies in the way this aspect of reading is taught. No one phonics scheme is used to ensure consistency of approach. Some resources do not demonstrate correct pronunciation of letter sounds. Few of the sessions we observed together moved on at the pace they should. Reasons include: excessive attention to letter formation that eclipses the phonics learning objective, and large-group activities in which pupils must wait a long time to contribute. You ensure that enough support staff are on hand in phonics sessions, but teachers are not making the best use of them.
- Several factors underpin the improvements to pupils' writing. Sharpening teachers' understanding of what typifies writing at the expected standard and greater depth has improved teaching and the accuracy of teachers' assessments. Teaching pupils the distinctive features of a wider range of writing and providing

them with more opportunities to practise these have also been significant. Improved spelling, punctuation and grammar have also contributed. Despite these improvements, progress in writing is not as strong as that in reading and mathematics. At key stage 2, progress is better than at key stage 1, especially in developing pupils' ability to write at greater depth. The key stage 2 sample of writing I reviewed showed that teachers are constantly focusing on developing the features that exemplify writing at this standard. Across the school, you and your staff come up with some excellent ideas to inspire pupils to write. The visit from a modern male poet, for example, enthused all pupils, and particularly boys, to write in this genre. Pupils' poems about the First World War are fine examples of this type of writing.

- Senior and subject leaders have designed a broad curriculum that meets the school's intentions for pupils' academic and personal development. Some subjects are taught separately, and others are taught as part of a theme that makes pertinent links between subjects. Inspired by your creative lead, staff bring the curriculum wonderfully to life. The engaging topics and imaginative ideas and activities they plan excite pupils and give them many memorable experiences. Pupils talked about the chocolate pots they made when studying the Maya civilization, the safe reconstruction of the Great Fire of London on the playground and making Viking-style bread and butter.
- Notwithstanding this success, you have identified the curriculum as a priority for improvement this year. This links well with your priority to look more closely at what makes great teaching. Both priorities will draw on research and consider how teaching can ensure the best possible learning for pupils over time. These priorities are timely. While pupils speak enthusiastically about their learning and recall many of the worthwhile activities and events they have experienced, their recollection of important knowledge is less secure.
- A strength of your curriculum is the way that fundamental British values are woven through subjects and topics. Teachers capitalise on opportunities to develop pupils' understanding of diversity and equalities and help them recognise stereotypes. In 'life lessons' and assemblies, pupils consider thought-provoking questions about such issues as immigration, mental health and homophobia. Pupils learn about different cultures and religious beliefs and debate moral and social issues. In history, for example, older pupils have considered the fairness of the Treaty of Versailles. All these experiences, and the school's very inclusive nature, ensure that pupils learn to value and respect people's differences. As pupils said, 'It just doesn't matter what race or religion you are or who you love.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the teaching of phonics improves so that the proportion of Year 1 pupils attaining the expected standard is at least in line with the national average and, by the end of Year 2, most, if not all, pupils attain this standard
- attainment and progress in writing continues to improve so that by the end of Year 2 and Year 6 pupils' attainment is at least in line with national averages at the expected standard and greater depth and is more consistent with the standards they reach in reading and mathematics
- in reviewing the implementation and impact of the curriculum, more attention is given to how pupils retain the knowledge and skills they have been taught
- governors increase the extent to which they hold leaders to account by asking more probing questions about pupils' attainment and progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Margot D'Arcy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and your senior leadership team to discuss leaders' evaluation of the school's work and priorities for improvement. I reviewed a range of school documents, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour and governors' meetings. I met with five governors and held a separate meeting with a representative from the local authority. We observed learning and behaviour in a sample of lessons. I listened to some pupils read and reviewed a sample of pupils' writing. I held a formal discussion with a group of pupils from key stage 2 and spoke to others informally at lunchtime. I spoke to some parents as they brought their children to school. I considered 53 responses to Ofsted's online parent survey, Parent View, including 35 written comments. I took account of 53 responses to Ofsted's online staff survey and 77 responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey.