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Mr Paul Worley
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Dear Mr Worley

Short inspection of Sycamore Academy

Following my visit to the school on 27 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 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. You have provided clear direction for the school during a period of expansion and ensured that the school has continued to provide an inclusive, stimulating environment for learning. This fully reflects the school's motto of 'learning and caring together.'

The leadership team has ensured that the school has a calm, purposeful ethos where pupils are encouraged and supported to achieve their best. Staff work hard to develop relationships with pupils that are positive and respectful, and as a result pupils are well behaved and try hard. Pupils enjoy school, look smart in their uniforms and take pride in their work. They feel that the school challenges them to do well and that teachers 'help you a lot'.

Pupils report that they enjoy the many learning opportunities that the school provides. They spoke with enthusiasm about the visits and activities that they experience and the wide range of after-school clubs. They value the opportunities to take part in sporting activities with other schools and appreciate the residential visits that are organised for them.

Parents and carers feel that the school communicates with them well and that their children make good progress. The school provides strong support for pupils who are new to the school, particularly those who speak English as an additional language. Parents told me about how the school had helped their children learn to speak

English and of the support that they received.

The L.E.A.D. academy trust provides strong challenge and support to the leadership team and supports the members of the academy advisory body to gain a greater understanding of how the school needs to improve. This has enabled them to challenge leaders. The academy advisory body members demonstrate commitment to the school and are keen to help it to improve further. They are actively involved in the school and use the range of online training to support them in their roles.

The leadership team has an accurate view of the school's strengths and the areas that require further improvement. They have a shared vision to provide the highest quality of education for every pupil. This, together with the support that you have received from the academy trust, has enabled leaders to raise standards and increase the progress that pupils make across many subjects.

Leaders recognise the importance of securing a strong foundation of skills and knowledge when pupils first start school, and they have worked hard to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the foundation stage. The percentage of children now achieving a good level of development at the end of the foundation stage has risen and children's attainment in the last two years is now in line with that achieved nationally. Since the last inspection, the school has also introduced provision to provide education for two-year-olds to ensure that children get off to a strong start and are ready to begin Nursery.

Leaders have worked hard to develop pupils' early reading skills. As a result, the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check has risen to be in line with the national average. In addition, the proportion of pupils that have attained the expected standard in reading at key stage 1 has been in line with national figures for two years. This improvement in attainment at key stage 1 has also been reflected in mathematics, with pupils achieving in line with national figures at both the expected standard and at greater depth for two years. Pupils' attainment in writing was also in line with national figures for both the expected standard and for greater depth in 2017.

Pupils' outcomes have also improved strongly in key stage 2 in writing and mathematics. Attainment at the expected standard in 2017 in both subjects was at least in line with the national average in both 2017 and 2018. The progress that pupils make in these subjects has also improved, so that it has been well above that seen nationally for the past two years.

At the last inspection, school leaders were asked to improve the quality of teaching and raise standards in English and mathematics by improving the level of challenge for the most able pupils. Leaders were also asked to provide additional support for children in the foundation stage and pupils in key stage 1, so that they would have a more secure foundation for their learning in key stage 2. The school has successfully addressed these areas for improvement in mathematics and writing but recognises that there is still more to be done to improve pupils' reading and comprehension skills. Leaders are also aware that they need to continue to provide

additional challenge for pupils, so that more pupils are able to achieve at greater depth across all subjects.

Safeguarding is effective

There is a strong culture of safeguarding and leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You ensure that the suitability of all staff and volunteers is appropriately checked before they start to work or volunteer at the school.

The designated safeguarding lead ensures that staff members receive regular training and are knowledgeable about safeguarding. Staff are clear about how to refer concerns about a pupil's welfare using an online tool and to discuss concerns directly if they feel a pupil is at serious risk. They have high levels of understanding around all aspects of safeguarding. They spoke of the need to be aware of pupils who may be most at risk and of the need to be vigilant.

The designated safeguarding lead is clear about child protection referral procedures and is tenacious in escalating concerns to ensure that pupils and families receive the support they need. She works closely with the school's family support worker and behaviour and attendance officer and this enables leaders to provide early support for families who may need it.

Pupils told me that the school is a friendly place and that they feel safe. They reported that bullying was extremely rare and were confident that, if it occurred, an adult would act quickly to sort it out. Pupils take part in anti-bullying week each year and are taught about e-safety.

There are strong procedures in place to help secure good attendance, and as a result the school has rates of attendance which are above those seen nationally.

Inspection findings

- During our tour of the school to see the learning that was taking place, we saw that early reading skills continue to be taught well. We saw that children in the foundation stage were already able to use their phonic knowledge confidently to write simple words, using correct letter formation. We also observed intervention groups in key stage 1 which provided additional support for pupils who were less secure in phonics. Some of these were at an early stage of learning to speak English. The most successful of these interventions used lively delivery and strong praise to engage pupils. This made learning fun and pupils responded with enthusiasm.
- Leaders have implemented a range of strategies to develop reading comprehension skills across the school. English planning ensures that pupils have access to quality texts to help widen their reading and develop their vocabulary. They have also introduced a consistent approach to the exploration of texts to develop pupils' reading comprehension skills and a programme to develop pupils' spoken language and use of vocabulary. In some lessons, strong questioning by

teachers about pictures and texts helped challenge pupils' thinking and deepen their understanding so that they were able to use wider vocabulary in their writing. Where this was less effective, some pupils began to lose focus. These strategies need further time to embed across the curriculum to secure a stronger impact on pupils' comprehension skills and help pupils to read at greater depth.

- The leadership team has given careful thought to the curriculum to ensure it broadens pupils' experiences and provides high-quality learning opportunities. Visits and activities are linked to themed curriculum topics, which are then used to provide a wide range of writing opportunities. The work scrutiny that we undertook together showed that cross-curricular work was being used to promote a range of writing skills effectively. Handwriting and presentation were of a high standard.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well. Respect for different cultures and religions is fostered through visits to different places of worship, visitors to school and the school's broad curriculum. This creates a tolerant and respectful school community. The school grounds have been developed to provide opportunities for outdoor learning to promote a greater awareness of environmental issues. Pupils work with instructors from the Prince William Awards to help build the skills of teamwork, self-discipline and resilience. The school holds the International Schools Award and recently took pupils on an exchange visit to China.
- Leaders monitor the quality of teaching very effectively and provide high-quality professional development opportunities to ensure that leadership at all levels is strong. Subject leaders are supported by senior leaders to undertake joint lesson observations. This enables them to have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses in curriculum delivery. Areas for individual staff professional development are linked to lesson observations of their practice. You hold regular progress meetings with teachers, and clear action plans are agreed and reviewed to target pupils who need additional support to make good progress. The monitoring of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is thorough and detailed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to improve reading by ensuring that reading strategies are fully embedded across all areas of the curriculum
- all pupils, particularly the most able, are challenged to make strong progress from their different starting points across a range of subjects.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the academy advisory body, the director and executive officer of the academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the

director of children's services for Nottingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Hawkes
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you and the two deputy headteachers to share the key lines of enquiry. I met separately with them to discuss their different areas of responsibility, these being the curriculum and safeguarding. I also met with the leaders with responsibility for mathematics and English, the school's family support worker and the behaviour and attendance officer. I also met with three members of the academy advisory body including the chair and vice chair, and I met with two members from the academy trust.

Together we looked at the school's breakfast club, classes in every year group and intervention support groups in phonics in key stage 1. We also examined pupils' work from Year 2 and Year 6 with both deputy headteachers. I spoke with pupils informally during lessons and breaktimes and formally during a group discussion. I listened to four pupils read from Years 2 and 3 and also observed pupils' behaviour around the school and in lessons. I examined a range of documents, including safeguarding records and policies, information relating to pupils' attendance and behaviour, a summary of the school's self-evaluation and the school's improvement plan. I spoke with several parents at the start of the school day and read the four responses to Ofsted's free-text service. I also considered the 25 responses to the staff survey and 17 responses to the pupil survey.