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Mrs Jillian Burrell
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Dear Mrs Burrell

Short inspection of Appletree Gardens First School

Following my visit to the school on 18 December 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 December 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

You know that pupils learn best when they feel safe and supported by those around them. You have placed equal importance on improving pupils' pastoral care with the same level of commitment and dedication to that of pupils' academic success. As a result, this is a very happy school, where pupils thrive.

You actively seek opportunities to be involved in research projects and to work alongside fellow professionals within the local authority and beyond, to share good practice and to learn from others. You have nurtured a mindset of continuous improvement among your staff, and you have invested in high-quality training and professional development opportunities to support them to improve their practice. Consequently, the quality of teaching across the school is securely good, and there is striking evidence of pupils' improved self-esteem and increased skills and confidence because of your efforts.

Your self-evaluation processes are detailed, and you have an accurate view of the school's overall effectiveness. Leaders' improvement plans are sharply focused upon the improvements to pupils' outcomes desired and identify the many interventions that will support them achieving their goals. However, they are not reflective of any shortcomings that may exist in the sequence with which teachers build pupils' subject-specific knowledge and skills, nor do they identify how to rectify this. This is

an area for improvement.

At the time of the last inspection you were asked to improve the quality of teachers' questioning. This was to ensure that pupils were challenged to think more deeply about their learning and to increase the proportion of pupils able to reach the higher standards. You accessed local authority support to provide training packages to improve teachers' questioning skills. This is now a strong aspect of teachers' practice, particularly in Year 4 and in the early years. In addition, you make explicit your expectations regarding the quality of teaching and learning across the school in your detailed guidance to staff. This ensures that there is consistent practice among all staff and that pupils have equality of access to the curriculum. Such is your commitment to continuous improvement that pupils' outcomes have improved year on year, especially in the proportion of pupils reaching the higher standards.

At the previous inspection leaders were also asked to review the approach to the teaching of the wider curriculum to ensure that pupils had access to more creative activities. Teachers now plan activities with this requirement in mind. They follow a topic-based approach to learning that makes relevant links between many subjects. More recently, you have focused upon finding topics that interest boys. This is because their performance has been historically lower than that of the girls. Teachers now carefully select topics to study that have the greatest appeal to all pupils. Wherever possible, teachers look to provide a meaningful context for pupils' study so that it has increased relevance. Pupils in Year 4, for example, were practising writing instructions and this was linked to the new climbing frame that has recently been installed in school. This approach is reflected across the school and leads to high levels of pupil engagement in lessons.

You set equally high expectations for pupils to behave well. Pupils across the school respond positively and demonstrate high levels of respect to one another and to adults. Playtimes are lively occasions, with pupils highly active, but when they return to class, their movement is orderly and calm. It is testimony to the success of your behaviour management strategies that although the inspection coincided with several Christmas performances, outside of these times, pupils were focused on their learning successfully and working hard to produce their very best work.

Governors share your commitment and dedication to ensure that all pupils achieve well and make good progress from their varying starting points. Governors bring a range of experiences and skills to their roles and use their expertise to good effect. They are diligent in the execution of their strategic roles, and their well-established programme of visits to the school means that they have a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Governors offer appropriate levels of challenge and support to school leaders and focus their actions on ensuring that pupils are kept safe and eager to learn.

Safeguarding is effective.

You place high priority on ensuring that pupils are safe. Leaders, including governors, ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff training is up to date with the latest government guidance, and staff are aware of

the important role they play in keeping children safe in school.

You have established a system for staff to report promptly any concerns that they may have, and case files show there is a clear chronology in place. A review of your records shows that you are swift to access support and guidance from other agencies to support you in your role as designated safeguarding lead. While this system has served you well, you have sought to move your records onto an electronic system, so that related documents can be more easily accessed.

Pupils who spoke to me told me that there were no unsafe places in school. They said that bullying and poor behaviour 'doesn't happen' and were confident that if it did, a member of staff would deal with it promptly. This view is shared by the parents who responded to Ofsted's parent survey, Parent View.

Inspection findings

- You have extended the age range of the school to include provision for two-year-old children. As part of this inspection, I wanted to see the effect this is having on improving children's readiness for learning and their subsequent outcomes. Staff quickly establish strong and trusting relationships with children. This enables very young children to establish strong attachments and to settle quickly into their new environment. Staff are highly skilled in responding to children's interests and needs, while focusing upon developing children's basic skills. As a result, children are thriving. They show great confidence in their surroundings and are making great strides in acquiring the important early skills of communication and language development, self-reliance and confidence. Together with your early years leader you have established a highly effective provision that gets children off to a great start.
- Such highly effective provision continues seamlessly into the Nursery and Reception class. The early years leader has an excellent understanding of how young children learn and of children's abilities when they start school. Her strong direction to an accomplished team has created a vibrant, language-rich environment in which children flourish. Any gaps in children's knowledge and skills that may exist when they start school are quickly identified and are diminishing by the time children transfer into Year 1. As a result, the proportion of children, including disadvantaged children, reaching a good level of development at the end of Reception is improving year on year and in 2018 this was above the national average.
- Pupils' outcomes in reading across the school have improved over time, particularly in the proportion of pupils reaching the higher standard. A focus for this inspection was to look at the support available to those lower-ability pupils who did not reach the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check and in the key stage 1 reading assessments. I found that leaders have invested heavily in training an army of volunteers to listen to pupils' read daily. This is contributing to the improvement in pupils' reading fluency and confidence. Leaders have also implemented several interventions to improve pupils' language comprehension skills, which are undoubtedly leading to the rise in pupils' reading ages. However, those pupils who read to me were practising their reading with

books that were not well matched to their abilities. For some, their books were too difficult and for others, too easy. This slows the speedy progress needed for these pupils to catch up. You identified that a review of how reading books are organised would iron this anomaly out moving forward.

- I also wanted to check how reading is developed outside of the discrete phonics sessions, by observing guided reading sessions and reading in the wider curriculum. Leaders have implemented a 'carousel approach' to guided reading sessions. Here, pupils rotate around different activities each day. Twice a week, pupils work with their teacher or a teaching assistant. During these sessions pupils are challenged well to think hard about their reading and to apply their phonics or whole-word techniques to gain meaning from text. However, when pupils are working without adult support, tasks lack challenge, and this slows the pace of their learning. In subjects beyond English, teachers explain important subject-specific vocabulary. However, occasionally, independent tasks lack the challenge needed to enable pupils to memorise and apply these unfamiliar words effectively. Independent reading tasks are not sufficiently demanding.
- Another focus for this inspection was to review the impact of the additional spending for disadvantaged pupils and for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Leaders conduct regular pupil-progress meetings to review the progress of every pupil. Any pupil showing signs of falling behind in their learning is quickly identified and a raft of interventions or additional support is then put in place. The SEND coordinator attends all of these meetings, which enables her to have a detailed knowledge of pupils' progress and the success or otherwise of the interventions in place. She wastes no time in seeking the support and advice of external professionals to ensure that both disadvantaged and pupils with SEND receive effective guidance to make good progress from their starting points.
- My final focus for the inspection was to review leaders' procedures for managing pupils' absence. The school's attendance figures have improved markedly in previous years and I wanted to check current rates of attendance across the school. Latest figures show that this improvement has been sustained for all pupils and groups of pupils. This is because the various procedures you put into action when a pupil is absent are working. You and the governors have set a level of 92% attendance as a trigger for closer monitoring. We discussed that a higher threshold would prevent more pupils from becoming a cause for concern.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- plans for improvement are sharply focused on the progression of subject-specific knowledge and skills that is needed to improve pupils' outcomes
- the books pupils use to practise their reading are closely linked to their phonics knowledge, particularly for the lower-ability pupils
- pupils' independent reading tasks in lessons outside of the discrete phonics session are sufficiently challenging to enable pupils to make speedy progress with

their reading.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you and the senior leadership team to discuss the impact of actions you are taking to continue to improve the school and to discuss safeguarding. We observed learning together in the early years and in key stages 1 and 2. While in lessons, we looked at pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning. I took account of the 103 views made by the parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and the written text comments made by 29 parents. I held meetings with four representatives of the governing body, including the vice-chair of the governing body. I had a meeting with the school improvement officer from the local authority. I talked to a group of key stage 1 and 2 pupils and heard them read. I scrutinised several documents, including a range of safeguarding documents, the school's written evaluation of its work and the school improvement plan. I also reviewed minutes from recent governing body meetings.