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Mr Andrew Reid
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Dear Mr Reid

Short inspection of Amherst School

Following my visit to the school on 17 January 2019, 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 February 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection will be a section 5 inspection.

You, your leaders and governors provide clear direction, which creates a strong sense of community and purpose which motivates staff and pupils to achieve very well. Leaders and governors are reflective and provide detailed plans to secure continuous improvement. Parents, carers, pupils and staff alike recognise the very high quality and dedication of the leadership you provide. All pupils responding to Ofsted's survey said that they enjoy coming to school and find lessons interesting. This enthusiasm is reflected in the high levels of attendance.

Staff are fully committed to delivering the school's values of trust, kindness, determination, politeness, fairness and cooperation; they all said they are proud to work at the school. Parents responded very positively and in large numbers to Ofsted's online questionnaire. Two parents, speaking for many, said: 'The children are very well motivated and inspired to learn as well as to participate in the many extra-curricular activities' and then, 'The teaching staff go above and beyond for their pupils.' Leaders are fulfilling the school's aim to 'Inspire every pupil'.

You have a clear and accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Leaders provide extensive support to colleagues but they also have high expectations and do not shy away from making difficult decisions. One of the many strengths of the school is the effective team of middle and senior leaders. They contribute very well to checking on the quality of teaching and learning through the use of the key monitoring task checklist you devised. Leaders use the information they gather to spot quickly where pupils are at risk of underachievement and put in place successful interventions. For example, you and your leaders were concerned that some pupils' skills in writing were not as strong as in reading and mathematics. Therefore you asked each teacher to identify those pupils who were most vulnerable to not making enough progress in writing. This group became a particular focus in English lessons, and their books show that this support has had a positive impact.

Pupils are very well behaved and have positive attitudes to learning. They recognise the high-quality support that they receive from adults in the school. One pupil told me that, 'adults do everything they can to help us'. Pupils are articulate, polite and well mannered. They listen well and respect other people's ideas. Their attitudes to learning are extremely positive. Pupils enjoy their learning and talk about their determination to do as well as they can. Pupils say that they enjoy the very wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer, currently over 50 clubs. These are varied and high quality. The school aims high; the table tennis team has been ranked in the top 10 nationally, and the school choir has reached the finals of a well-known national competition.

Governors continue to provide you with support and offer robust challenge. They know the school well and are passionate about its role within the community. Governors regularly visit the school and shadow year group leaders so that they have first-hand experience of the effectiveness of leadership. They receive regular training opportunities, including in safeguarding, preventing radicalisation and extremism, and effective monitoring. They commission external quality assurance advisers to ensure that they have an independent view.

Safeguarding is effective.

A strong culture of safeguarding exists throughout the school. The single central record is well maintained. Recruitment checks on staff are thorough and recorded in line with statutory requirements. Staff training is kept up to date and is effective.

Pupils know about how to keep themselves safe including when online, because they are taught about safety as part of computing lessons and e-safety events. You have provided information and presentations to parents about online safety. You provide regular safety lessons to pupils, either through the new personal, health and social education lessons or through visitors to the school. Recent events include bike-ability courses, swimming safety, drugs education, first-aid lessons, fire safety and NSPCC assemblies.

Pupils who I spoke with during the inspection said that the school is a very safe place and that there is always someone to speak to or help them if they have concerns. Pupils know what bullying is and they said it is extremely rare at the school. Almost every parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View agreed that their children feel safe at the school and that the school deals effectively with bullying. At lunchtime, the playground is well supervised and pupils know who to go to if they hurt themselves or have a worry.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed the lines of enquiry that I would follow during the inspection. The first area would be to review why the rate of progress in writing for middle-attaining pupils was less than their progress in reading and mathematics.
- I found that writing has a high profile in the school, with systems and events to encourage pupils to be well motivated and enthusiastic about writing. You have introduced a whole-school book project twice a year to provide a diverse range of topics to inspire writing in depth. Examples include 'Shackleton's Journey' by Will Grill, on the theme of Antarctica, and 'Flotsam' by David Weisner, on the theme of under the sea. The writing and art outcomes on display reflected a high standard and the clear pride pupils have for their work. In addition, leaders have developed more detailed assessment criteria focusing on the spelling, punctuation and grammar aspects of English as well as a strategy to ensure that tasks set are well matched to the needs of pupils. These strategies are effective, and the progress of middle-attaining pupils in writing has improved over the last three years. Currently, progress is catching up with that in reading and mathematics.
- This is a high-achieving school. The three-year average in reading and mathematics attainment puts the school in the top 10% nationally by the end of key stage 2. In 2018, at the end of key stage 2, a far higher proportion of pupils achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics than was seen nationally. Progress in mathematics was in the top 20% of schools nationally for the last two years.
- Second, I looked at how effectively the curriculum provides opportunities for pupils to write across a range of subjects and in depth. Both the formal and the informal curriculum are broad and offer effective opportunities to write in more depth. This was reflected in the English and topic books, where opportunities were found for cross-curricular links. For instance, in Year 6, pupils were studying 'Goodnight Mr Tom' in English lessons and the social impact of the Second World War in their history topic. This has led to writing that reflects the depth of pupils' understanding about the consequences of war. The middle leader for English supports year group leaders with the planning of their curriculum to ensure that work is interesting and challenging and to make sure that there are meaningful opportunities to write in depth.
- Lastly, I wanted to consider the impact subject leaders are making on improving pupils' progress. Middle leaders carry out detailed audits of their areas of responsibility and conduct joint monitoring activities with governors. They have

looked closely at the impact of teaching on pupils' progress and they check that teachers' assessments are accurate. They scrutinise pupils' work and check teachers' planning. The English leaders have developed partnerships with other schools, so that moderation of standards can be meaningful. Pupils' achievements in English and mathematics continue to improve as a result of strong leadership.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to improve progress in writing for middle-attaining pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Robin Boshier
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you to discuss the school's self-evaluation information, with a focus on pupils' progress and the improvements since the last inspection. We visited nine classes on several 'learning walks' across Years 3 to 6 to observe teaching and learning, and we looked at a range of pupils' work in books. I also scrutinised a number of pupils' topic and English books. I observed behaviour during lessons and at lunchtime. I met with pupils to find out about their experience of school and how safe they feel.

I had meetings with middle and senior leaders and governors. I spoke on the telephone with the school improvement partner. I looked at a range of written evidence, including the school's self-evaluation document, the school improvement plan, the single central record and other documents related to safeguarding, as well as the school's curriculum. I took account of the views of 182 parents who completed Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View, including free-text comments. I also took account of the views of 28 members of staff and 65 pupils who completed Ofsted's online surveys.