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Mrs Samantha Oxley
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Dear Mrs Oxley

Short inspection of Benyon Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 12 February 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 April 2015.

This school continues to be good.

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

Benyon Primary School is a welcoming, purposeful and caring school community where staff and pupils have high expectations. Pupils understand your ethos that 'perseverance brings success'. You have ensured that pupils work in ways that demonstrate to them the value of trying hard and that build their resilience. When undertaking extended writing tasks, for example, pupils are encouraged to plan their work carefully, and to review, edit and improve it. Pupils typically take pride in their work, present it well and try hard.

Teachers plan activities carefully so that pupils confidently take the next steps in their learning. Pupils told me that, 'Teachers are really helpful. If you find something difficult they show you ways to work it out.' Leaders and staff are developing pupils' sense of ambition. Typically, pupils' work demonstrates that they apply themselves well to more difficult tasks. They told me that although they do not find their work too easy, they would welcome even more challenge.

Teachers encourage pupils to think hard because they ask questions that require pupils to develop their ideas, provide evidence for their arguments and consider others' perspectives. Assemblies encourage pupils to consider 'big questions', such as whether experimenting on animals is legitimate if it saves human lives. Many pupils engage in activities outside of the classroom that promote their personal development. Year 6 pupils are proud to be selected to serve as peer mediators,

computing technicians and environment monitors as part of the school's 'pupil employment scheme'. This work develops pupils' sense of responsibility as they make a positive contribution to the school community.

Staff ensure that pupils behave well, both during lessons and at social times. Instances of serious misbehaviour are infrequent. Teachers' clear instructions, praise and encouragement all help pupils to get down to work quickly. Pupils are willing to keep trying if they get something wrong. They develop the confidence to share ideas or answers even if they are not sure about them. This enables teachers to identify and tackle pupils' misconceptions quickly.

Together with other leaders, governors and the multi-academy trust (MAT), you regularly and rigorously check the quality of the school's work. After completing an audit in June 2018, you prioritised a series of improvements within the early years, which are promoting children's learning across the curriculum well. Pupils' phonics learning is particularly strong and their performance in the phonics screening check is high because you have made reading a priority. In key stage 1, pupils' writing and mathematics are strengths. Since the previous inspection, leaders have extended pupils' opportunities to develop their literacy skills and to write at length for different purposes. As a result, older pupils in particular write very well.

Disadvantaged pupils make at least as much progress as other pupils. This is because you ensure that barriers to their learning are removed so that they gain maximum benefit from the effective teaching that they usually receive. Typically, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make good progress from their individual starting points. This is because teachers meet these pupils' academic needs and plan activities that promote their personal development.

Governors and the MAT's senior officers are ambitious for the school. They have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and priorities for improvement and promote joint working with other schools within the trust that helps raise standards. Governors gain regular and precise information about pupils' progress because teachers across the trust's schools work together to confirm the accuracy of each other's assessments. Governors use this, and other information about behaviour, attendance and safeguarding to hold leaders to account.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Pupils, staff and parents are rightly confident that the school is a safe place. Staff know pupils well and are alert to any concerning changes in their attendance, appearance or behaviour, which they report promptly. Safeguarding records are kept meticulously and leaders are tenacious in ensuring that pupils who need it receive appropriate help from external agencies.

Pupils learn how to recognise and minimise different risks, including when playing

online games. They know how to report any inappropriate material if they come across it while searching the internet at home. Pupils told me that bullying is infrequent, and that racial or homophobic incidents are almost unknown. The school's monitoring information supports this view.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry involved establishing how far improvements to teaching have strengthened pupils' progress in writing at key stage 1. This was found to be a priority at the time of the previous inspection. Leaders have ensured that work within English is challenging and that the sequencing of writing activities promotes pupils' strong progress. Pupils immerse themselves in writing tasks, and are often inspired by trips, visits or the stories that they have read. They have regular opportunities to listen, discuss and debate. These widen their vocabulary and develop their thinking. Pupils are supported to edit and improve their work, which helps them to write with more descriptive power, or to convey an argument with greater clarity and force.
- These and other teaching techniques enable pupils to write at length in English compellingly and with an accurate command of spelling, punctuation and grammar. They structure their work appropriately when writing creatively or for different purposes, such as completing a report or summarising research findings. It is clear from scrutiny of pupils' work that they develop strong writing skills at key stage 1, and that they refine these further during key stage 2. Key stage 2 pupils' extended writing is well crafted and coherent. Pupils develop plot, suspense and characterisation when writing imaginatively. Their text encourages the reader to read on.
- A further priority identified at the time of the previous inspection was for the most able pupils to write in greater depth in subjects like history and geography. Leaders have made changes to the curriculum so that appropriate opportunities for such writing are planned for. Pupils research topics such as the Great Fire of London before writing reports in a newspaper format, for example. They develop their knowledge well across different subjects. However, they do not yet have sufficient opportunities to respond at length to challenging questions that develop their subject-specific skills fully.
- My third line of enquiry involved establishing how far key stage 2 pupils are making good progress in mathematics. This is because in 2018, the proportion of pupils who achieved a higher standard in this subject was below the national average. Leaders accurately identified that pupils lacked confidence in applying their mathematics knowledge to problem-solving and reasoning tasks.
- Teachers have benefited from additional training and leaders have introduced a 'maths mastery' curriculum so that pupils engage in such problem-solving and reasoning work more frequently. Scrutiny of pupils' work indicates that most are developing their mathematical fluency well and that teachers usually identify pupils' misconceptions quickly and help them to correct these. However, the extent to which pupils complete problem-solving and reasoning tasks remains too variable.

- My fourth line of enquiry sought to establish how effectively children in Reception are being prepared for Year 1. This is because last year, the proportion who attained a good level of development at the end of early years fell and was significantly below the national average. Leaders have taken swift action to raise standards. The recently appointed early years leader has benefited from expert training and support. She has broadened the early years curriculum and is ensuring that children can choose from a wide range of purposeful activities to engage in.
- Teachers are developing children's communication and social skills, by talking to them about what they are learning and by modelling and encouraging cooperative behaviour, such as sharing and turn-taking. Children are polite, behave well and socialise appropriately together as a result. Children regularly engage in activities that involve problem-solving, including those that develop their basic numeracy skills. These activities also help to promote children's resilience. Leaders' monitoring accurately judges that children are making good progress within most aspects of the early years curriculum. Children have too few opportunities to write independently, however.
- My final line of enquiry sought to ascertain whether pupils attend school well. This is because absence rates were too high at the time of the previous inspection. Over the 2017–18 academic year, the proportion of pupils persistently absent was above the national average. Leaders have improved pupils' and parents' understanding of the impact of low attendance upon progress. Leaders reward pupils who come to school every day unless they are ill and do all that they can to discourage parents from taking their children on term-time holidays. Leaders, including the attendance officer, identify the reasons behind an individual pupil's absence and often liaise effectively with their families to overcome the difficulties.
- Because of this work, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school has fallen significantly since the start of the current academic year. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged pupils, whose rate of persistent absence is now below that of other pupils. Leaders are introducing a free breakfast entitlement for all pupils. They anticipate that 'breakfast club' will encourage even less absence and help to encourage all pupils to get to school on time. It is too soon to establish the impact of this work.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils have appropriate opportunities to develop their subject-specific skills by responding at length to challenging questions, in subjects other than English and mathematics
- all pupils fully develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills in mathematics
- children in Reception have sufficient opportunities to practise their writing skills independently.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive

officer of the Catalyst MAT, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Thurrock. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you, the deputy headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, the MAT's chief executive officer, other school staff, governors and a group of pupils. Together with you and other leaders, we made short visits to several classes to observe teaching, look at pupils' books and to see pupils at work. I reviewed samples of pupils' work. I scrutinised school documents about self-evaluation and safeguarding, including the single central record and records of child protection. I also considered the 43 responses to the Ofsted questionnaire from parents, alongside the school's information about parental and staff perspectives.