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Mrs Claire Jaques
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jaques

Short inspection of Powers Hall Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 6 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 January 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Together with other senior leaders and governors, you continue to work with a determination and commitment to ensure that, from the Nursery through to the end of key stage 1, pupils are prepared well for the next stage in their education.

Consequently, Powers Hall Infant School is a happy, purposeful and welcoming learning community. Pupils' positive attitudes to their education and typically good behaviour are underpinned by the rules that they have created together with their teachers: 'We use kind words and actions, we show respect to everyone and we listen to everyone in our school.' Pupils are polite and eager to speak about their work. I was especially impressed with the respect shown by the pupil 'meeters and greeters' as they welcomed me into each lesson and explained to me enthusiastically about the work they were doing.

After a dip in outcomes, in 2017, for pupils at the end of key stage 1 and in the Year 1 phonics screening check, standards are rising. Pupils made stronger progress in 2018. In-school assessment information and the work I saw in books suggest further improvements currently. Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are also improving but gaps remain between outcomes for this group and those of their non-disadvantaged peers in school and nationally. In 2018, boys' attainment exceeded that of girls in almost all aspects of the end-of-key-stage-1 national assessments. This imbalance is levelling out this year.

The whole-school focus on developing a love of reading and improving pupils' reading skills is effective. In one example of the things that are making a difference, it was a pleasure to sit with families in the 'reading together' session before lessons started. I enjoyed hearing pupils read confidently and speaking about their books.

Similarly, stronger progress is evident in writing this year because of the strategies that you have put in place. However, the consistency of the quality of pupils' writing across the school is not yet as strong as their oral communication skills.

In the early years, children are well cared for and provided with stimulating places to learn. You have improved the outdoor area significantly since the previous inspection. Teachers' planning is thoughtfully tailored to meet children's needs and interests, both outdoors and indoors, with a suitable balance of adult-led and child-initiated learning.

The specialist resource base for pupils with speech, language and communication difficulties offers a nurturing environment, with learning effectively matched to pupils' needs. You are right to be proud of the recently accredited Essex Gold Award for the quality of provision and service you offer at the school. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are typically well supported across year groups and so they make suitable progress from their different starting points.

Leadership has been strengthened through a restructuring of roles and responsibilities following the 2014 inspection. Two assistant headteachers support your work effectively, together with key stage and subject leads. A strong focus on professional development and shared good practice has secured the confidence and effectiveness of the wider leadership team.

Together with other leaders and governors, you have a clear understanding of what the school is doing well and the aspects that need to change. Appropriate action has been taken to deal with the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. However, senior leaders', including governors', checks on the spending of pupil premium funding could be more closely matched against pupils' outcomes to ensure that the most effective strategies are prioritised.

You have taken steps to improve pupils' attendance overall and to reduce the incidence of persistent absence. Your unrelenting focus on this aspect, for example through your regular communications with parents, attendance awards and the work of the family liaison officer, is making a difference. There is a clear trend of improvement but there is more to be done to ensure that disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND attend school as regularly as they should.

Safeguarding is effective.

A strong and effective culture of safeguarding is well established across the school. Leaders, governors and all staff are committed to keeping the pupils in their care safe. Secure links with external agencies, including health professionals and the police, lead to appropriate follow-up action. Pastoral support has been strengthened

further through the appointment of the family liaison officer. She works very effectively with families to help to reduce any specific barriers to learning and to ensure that pupils attend school regularly.

All the necessary recruitment checks are carried out prior to the employment of new staff. Records are well maintained and meet statutory requirements. Safeguarding training is regularly updated. Consequently, staff are clear about their duty of care responsibilities and understand what they need to do if they have any concerns. Pupils told me that they feel safe in school and that they would tell an adult if they were worried. They are taught about how to keep safe when using the internet and helpful guidance is provided for parents. Almost all parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that pupils are safe.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed the areas that I would look at during my time in the school. My first line of enquiry focused on pupils' outcomes. Together, we considered whether these were continuing to improve and whether all groups of pupils were achieving equally well. This was because of a dip in the results of the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1 in 2017, and in published assessment information for the national tests at the end of key stage 1.
- In 2018, the phonics results rose above the national average, representing a marked improvement on the previous year. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, also made stronger progress with their writing, mathematics and science at the end of key stage 1. The proportion of pupils attaining at the highest level in reading, writing and mathematics was greater than the national average.
- The work we saw in pupils' books suggests that these trends are continuing. While the differences in outcomes between boys and girls and disadvantaged pupils and their peers is reducing, there is more to do to ensure that any remaining gaps close quickly.
- In the context of improving outcomes, my next line of enquiry was to check the difference leaders' actions have made in raising teaching standards. In our discussions, you explained to me how you have revised the school's marking and feedback policy. This was because of concerns raised in the previous inspection.
- Observing together in lessons, we saw a high level of consistency in teachers' application of your policy expectations. Pupils understand how the system operates. They spoke confidently with me about their 'challenges' and what they needed to do next to improve their work.
- You have taken effective action to address previous weaknesses in phonics teaching. Staff training has been strengthened and good practice shared. There is a well-established and visible commitment to raising standards in reading from the Nursery through to the end of key stage 1. The pupils who read to me were well versed in using the strategies that they had been taught, for example to help them sound out difficult words. Regular reviews of pupils' progress ensure that suitable support is put in place as needed.

- Appropriately, you have established an equally strong focus on securing greater consistency in the quality and quantity of pupils' writing across subjects. We saw this work in action across all year groups, including in the Reception classes and through children's mark-making in the Nursery. However, although improving, you agreed with me when I said that pupils' writing skills are not yet as routinely well developed as their oral communication skills.
- Outdoor learning spaces have been thoughtfully redesigned so that children in the early years have access to stimulating learning opportunities in a vibrant environment. These opportunities are as equally well planned for outdoors as they are in the bright and spacious indoor areas. This is a significant improvement on previous inspection findings.
- The previous inspection also found that some new leaders did not have the skills they needed to improve their areas of responsibility. Consequently, my next line of enquiry focused on leadership changes. Since the 2014 inspection, the leadership team has been restructured. The appointment of two assistant headteachers has strengthened overall capacity. Leaders at all levels have access to appropriate professional development. Regular reviews of teaching and learning, checks on the accuracy of teachers' assessments and partnership working with other schools ensure that good practice is shared. Suitable action is taken to deal with any shortfall in performance. The areas for improvement from the previous inspection have been addressed.
- Finally, we looked at how effectively pupils are supported to attend school regularly. We agreed this line of enquiry because the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent in 2017 was well above the national average, especially for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. Working together with governors and through support from the family liaison officer, your relentless focus on improving attendance has paid off. Information for 2018 and in the current year shows attendance figures in line with the national average and a significant reduction in persistent absence.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- any remaining gaps in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and between boys and girls narrow rapidly
- improvement strategies are systematically reviewed against pupils' progress to check that they are working
- greater consistency is secured in the quality and quantity of pupils' writing across subjects
- the proportion of pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils who are regularly absent from school continues to reduce.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the two assistant headteachers with responsibility for special educational needs and the school's specialist resource base for speech, language and communication. I also spoke with other senior leaders, three governors, including the chair of the governing body, and held a telephone discussion with a representative of the local authority. In paired visits to lessons with you and other members of the senior leadership team, we observed pupils' learning in all year groups, including children in the Nursery, and looked at their work. I heard pupils from Years 1 and 2 reading in a 'reading together' session before school and spoke with them and their family members. Another Year 2 pupil read to me later in the day. I looked at a range of documents, including school policies, safeguarding records and assessment information. I observed pupils at play at lunchtime and chatted with them in the dining hall as they ate lunch. I also considered 36 free-text responses and 38 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire, Parent View.