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Mrs Lisa Clark
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Clark

Short inspection of Hamstel Infant School and Nursery

Following my visit to the school on 4 July 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 2016, and since the school joined Portico Academy Trust.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your dedicated, highly skilled team of teaching staff are providing a secure, safe and happy environment for pupils to learn and thrive. Because of your high expectations and clear and united vision, pupils, many of whom are vulnerable, are helped to access the best support and make good and better progress in their learning. Parents are appreciative of all that you do for them and their children. During my conversations with them, one parent's sentiment echoed those of many, saying that, 'It is difficult to know who to thank as there are so many members of staff responsible for helping my child.'

Your commitment to pupils and families is unwavering, and this extends further into the wider community. Leaders are very knowledgeable about the local context, with many having worked with families for many years. They use this knowledge proactively to protect and support pupils' well-being. Leaders share their vast amount of experience and knowledge, particularly around nurture and pupils' well-being, to support other schools. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school. Many who responded to Ofsted's free-text service say their children are thriving, excelling and developing in confidence. They describe the school as a place where pupils are supported, safe and are made to feel valued.

You ensure that pupils experience a healthy lifestyle while at school and have encouraged all families to take advantage of the universal free-school meals. All pupils, without exception, now have a hot and healthy cooked meal at lunchtime.

Pupils are enthusiastic learners and approach tasks positively and with purpose. They are keen to share their learning with adults. Pupils in Year 2 happily discussed their work on creating a fact file and were able to reel off many facts about dolphins and other sea creatures.

You have developed the school library to meet the needs of pupils, many of whom were not getting an opportunity to read at home and require more access to books. The library is now well-resourced and has recently been extended to develop pupils' love of reading and give pupils more regular access to a wide range of texts. This has been a success. Pupils told me that they enjoy reading and were proud to announce their progress in terms of their reading level.

Teachers plan activities carefully to address specific areas where pupils' skills and abilities are the weakest. For example, leaders identified that there is a need to improve and develop pupils' language skills. In early years, teachers ensure that there is a strong focus on vocabulary and talk. Adults build on this further in key stage 1 by consistently modelling the correct grammatical terms in lessons, to develop pupils' writing. For example, pupils in Year 1 were able to identify 'imperative' verbs in their instructional writing. In addition, pupils are given many opportunities to develop their speaking, listening and communications skills through sharing their work and through class discussions. Teachers consistently demonstrate high expectations of behaviour. Pupils' behaviour is excellent. They work diligently and independently, politely sharing equipment with no fuss.

Learning outside the classroom is a particular strength of the school. The extensive outside area has been used to create a wonderful resource so that pupils can grow and harvest a range of vegetables. Throughout the year, pupils are supported to carry out activities that develop their confidence and their ability to manage risks successfully in a safe and natural environment. Enthusiastic adults create experiences that build on pupils' topic work, for example recreating the fire of London, and using nature to create artwork and to cook using the outdoor firepit.

Leaders' focus on well-being extends to all staff, the majority of whom say that they are proud to be a member of the school. You ensure that staff are listened to and supported emotionally as well as professionally.

The school places the child's needs deeply at the centre of its work. Some of the pupils' needs are being successfully met through the school's speech and language resource base and the nurture unit. This early intervention means that pupils are prepared well to access learning. In addition, the school's Department for Education (DfE) Specialist Unit for Autism is held in high regard by school professionals across the country. Its success at supporting pupils with specific needs is demonstrated by the demand for more places for pupils again this year. The school is recognised as being a safe, nurturing environment and is continually oversubscribed year-on-year.

Safeguarding is effective.

Your efforts to safeguard pupils are relentless. All staff place safeguarding pupils at the heart of their work. Strong team work, staff vigilance, sound knowledge and skills ensure that pupils get the support they need. Leaders work exceptionally well with families so that they also get the right help in a timely fashion. Weekly team meetings bring together the many staff who have specific responsibilities for pupils' well-being so that no child is overlooked.

You work tirelessly to ensure that pupils get their entitlement to the support they need. This often involves challenging external agencies and persistently following up concerns until you get an acceptable outcome for the pupils in your care. In many cases, you have needed to be the advocate for the most vulnerable pupils in your community. Office staff are knowledgeable and meticulous. They ensure that processes for checking the suitability of adults who work with pupils and who visit the school meet requirements. Employee files are well organised and hold the necessary information.

Staff have received the appropriate training to help identify pupils at risk from radicalisation and gang activity, known as county lines. Pupils use the 'worry' boxes in classrooms to communicate any concerns. They feel confident to discuss any worries with adults, who they trust to sort things out. Pupils spoken with say that they are happy and safe, and the vast majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, agreed. Pupils also have an appropriate knowledge of the potential dangers when using the internet.

Morning calls to pupils' homes to support parents in getting their children to school, frequent parent-teacher meetings and parent workshops are all having a positive impact in helping parents understand the importance of every day attendance, particularly for Reception children. Pupils' attendance and progress are monitored very closely. Effective catch-up programmes are in place to minimise the impact of pupils' absence on learning.

Inspection findings

- I wanted to explore how leaders were improving writing as, in 2018, attainment at the end of Year 2 was lower than that of mathematics and reading. The proportion of pupils writing at both the expected standard and at greater depth was below the national average.
- The early years team's approach to writing is closely linked to the teaching of phonics, where children routinely get opportunities to apply their phonics skills to writing activities. Adults introduce children to holding a pencil correctly early on and visible prompts are on display to help children remember. In addition, each child has a modelled piece of writing at the beginning of their writing book to show them clearly what is expected in terms of presentation and letter formation. As a result, children are making good and better progress in writing.

- This good practice is subsequently built on effectively in Years 1 and 2. Pupils' books show strong progress over time. Many pupils are forming their letters correctly, writing on the line, structuring sentences using adjectives, conjunctions and accurate punctuation. The most able pupils are using a variety of sentence openers, a range of high-level vocabulary and are writing at length. However, in some cases, guidance from teachers on next steps and how to improve their work is not precise enough to enable these pupils to make even better progress.
- Pupils' presentation in their writing books is of a good quality and generally of a high standard. However, this is not always transferred into their work in other areas of the curriculum. Pupils themselves pointed out that they are not as careful with their writing presentation in their topic work as they are in their writing books. Leaders agreed. In addition, there was less evidence found for pupils being given enough opportunities to practise grammar, spelling and punctuation skills in other areas of the curriculum.
- Although attainment in reading was in line with national expectations at expected and greater depth at the end of 2018, the number of pupils who reached the required standard in the phonics screening check was below that expected nationally. This is partly due to the fact that some children enter Reception not having any pre-school experience at all, and many enter with skills and abilities below those typical for their age.
- Leaders are addressing this by teaching the phonics programme much earlier in the Nursery. As a result, more children who enter Reception from the school's own Nursery have already made a strong start on developing early language skills. Leaders have also adapted the reading programme by ensuring that the texts pupils are reading better match their phonics learning. This has improved pupils' confidence and reading skills, leading to strong improvements in the teaching and learning of phonics. Consequently, more children in Reception are achieving the early learning goal in reading and more pupils currently in Year 1 are anticipated to meet the expected standard at the end of this academic year.
- Disadvantaged pupils are extremely well supported to make good and better progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Leaders track pupils very closely, identifying all potential barriers to them accessing their learning. The school's inclusion manager and the leader of the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) work closely with other leaders to ensure that pupils get the support they need to make good and better progress. Disadvantaged pupils who shared their work with me were able to recognise the good progress they had made in writing from the beginning of the year. In mathematics, too, pupils' work and their knowledge showed that they are making good progress from their different starting points.
- You and your team go above and beyond to make sure that pupils with SEND are supported from the minute they arrive. Children with SEND, and those experiencing challenging situations, are identified through home visits and subsequent visits by your leader of SEN provision. You have already made the necessary changes and have adapted provision to welcome more children with specific needs, helping to support their transition into the school next academic year. This means that staff are already suitably informed, equipped and have the

necessary resources in place so that pupils can be helped to access their learning immediately and make good progress emotionally and academically from their very different starting points.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers give more opportunities for pupils to practise their grammar and punctuation skills across a range of subjects
- leaders and teachers monitor pupils' work more precisely to ensure that the most able pupils make even better progress
- pupils consistently apply their presentation and writing skills across all curriculum subjects.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Southend-on-Sea. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Cindy Impey
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I visited all year groups across the school, to observe teaching and learning and the behaviour of pupils. I examined work in books and spoke with pupils about their learning. I looked at a range of documentation, including safeguarding records, information about pupils' progress, school development plans, leaders' self-evaluations and governors' minutes. Meetings were held with you, senior leaders, including your leader of provision for pupils with SEND, the inclusion manager and the well-being leader. I met with four governors, including the chair of governors, and with the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust. I also met with a group of pupils about their learning and listened to a group of pupils read. I considered 64 responses to Ofsted's staff survey, 44 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 43 responses to Ofsted's parents' free-text facility. I also spoke with parents at the beginning and during the school day.