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Miss Julie Heaslip
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Dear Miss Heaslip

Short inspection of Houghton Conquest Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 11 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 second short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in November 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last short inspection. You have recently taken on the role of acting headteacher, alongside your class teaching responsibilities. This is a demanding responsibility and you are maintaining extremely high levels of teaching, learning and assessment in your own classroom, while ensuring that the school as a whole is well led and managed.

Earlier this year, leaders and governors considered reorganising the Reception class and the pre-school so that they shared the same building. Following discussions with parents, plans were drawn up which included some building work to improve the building. However, due to changes in staffing, governors took the pragmatic decision not to proceed with these plans. The pre-school is a strength of the school. Learning is very well organised, with a strong focus on social development which prepares children well for entry into the Reception class. The pre-school room leader provides high-quality leadership and the setting is rightly highly regarded by parents.

Over the past few years, some key stage 2 pupils have left the school often in an attempt to secure a place at their preferred middle school. The reduction in numbers has led to the creation of a mixed Year 3 and Year 4 class, which some parents dislike. The local authority recognises that admissions arrangements in the area have had an impact on this school. Leaders and governors have ensured that the quality of teaching provided for pupils in Years 3 and 4 remains strong.

Nevertheless, some parents feel that they have not been well informed about why some pupils leave the school before the end of Year 4. Leaders and governors have also not shared with parents how they ensure that high standards are maintained in key stage 2.

Reading is a strength of the school, and outcomes in formal assessments show that pupils reach standards which are above, and often well above, those achieved nationally by the end of Year 2. Leaders are ambitious to maintain these high standards and have invested in high-quality reading materials. Teachers use these texts skilfully to plan learning which further enriches pupils' language skills.

Provision for the small number of disadvantaged pupils in the school is closely monitored by you and the governors. You ensure that all pupils are well supported, through timely intervention activities which help them make good progress. The good range of additional help provided for disadvantaged pupils includes social and emotional support and structured opportunities to build confidence.

Many parents and carers are hugely supportive of the school, appreciating the high priority that staff and leaders give to the welfare and personal development of pupils. I spoke informally to parents in the playground and I also examined the views of those who responded to Ofsted's online text questionnaire. Typical comments included: 'the teachers are amazing', 'my child loves coming to school', and 'my child has made fantastic progress'. Nevertheless, a significant minority of parents want to understand more about how behaviour is managed, why some pupils have left the school and about changes to staffing. Some of these parents do not believe that leaders and governors have done enough to communicate with them.

Governors ensure that they understand the needs, strengths and priorities of the school well. They ask appropriately challenging questions of senior leaders and they are fully supportive of you as acting headteacher. Governors recognise the professionalism, rigour and high standards which you bring to the role. Governors acted very quickly, as soon as the need arose, to appoint an acting headteacher. They ensured that effective support was arranged to assist you, including advice from the local authority and support from an experienced local headteacher. You are making excellent use of these professional development opportunities.

Attendance has been in line with the national average for the last two years, although the percentage of pupils who are persistent non-attenders was above average last year. Leaders monitor attendance closely, and measures are in place to encourage good attendance and to support pupils, especially vulnerable pupils, when attendance slips. As a result, the proportion of pupils who frequently miss school has reduced this school year.

You are ambitious for the school to continue to improve and you have clear plans to build upon existing strong outcomes. You recognise the need to embed new approaches to the teaching of mathematics to enable even more pupils to attain greater depth. You are also ensuring that there is greater consistency in the quality

of provision right across the early years, so that outcomes at the end of Reception are consistently high.

Safeguarding is effective.

You ensure that the school's safeguarding arrangements are well organised, securely maintained and fit for purpose. Records of adults' suitability to work with pupils are clear and comprehensive, as are the records of contractors working on the school site. The designated safeguarding governor carries out monitoring activities to ensure that systems are robust. Teachers and support staff understand their role in keeping pupils safe at the school, and they understand how to report any concerns. You liaise effectively with other agencies, ensuring that concerns are followed up quickly. When the need arises, you seek advice in a timely manner from specialist child-protection advisers. The pupils I spoke to informally around the school told me that they feel safe and happy at the school. Parents confirm that pupils are well looked after and well cared for.

Inspection findings

- In order to ascertain whether the school remained good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. One of these was about the steps leaders are taking to ensure that the high standards in progress and attainment are being maintained. Also, I explored what steps are being taken to further improve pupils' outcomes in mathematics, so that they match the exceptionally high standards reached in reading.
- In September 2018, as a result of your analysis of the most recent assessments, you chose and introduced a new scheme to support teachers' planning of mathematics. This has enabled you to raise expectations about the level of challenge given to pupils, especially the most able, and to ensure that pupils consolidate their mathematical fluency and improve their reasoning skills. This is having a positive impact on pupils' progress. Nevertheless, it is a new approach and teachers are still improving their skills in implementing it.
- In pupils' books, we saw good examples of these new strategies. In Year 3 and Year 4 books, for example, we saw numerous examples of pupils responding well to the good level of challenge in a range of work including fractions, algebra, time and the properties of quadrilaterals. In a key stage 1 class, pupils were highly engaged in work on number facts and patterns and applying their knowledge to solve problems. The work was extremely well matched to pupils' needs, because it was based on clear assessment information which presented pupils with a good level of challenge. Furthermore, the teacher's clear success criteria enabled pupils to understand exactly what was expected of them.
- It was clear that, across the school, teachers' effective use of questioning, coupled with a focus on mathematical discussions and the use of appropriately challenging tasks for pupils of different abilities, allowed pupils to learn deeply.
- My next line of enquiry was about the early years, and whether children still get off to a good start in the pre-school and Reception class. Over the previous three years, the percentage of children achieving a good level of development has

been above the national average, while outcomes at the end of this term are lower.

- The pre-school offers children an exceptionally good start. Learning is vibrant, adults are well qualified and effective, procedures for welfare and safeguarding are robust and the pre-school room is led by a very effective practitioner with a wealth of knowledge and experience. As a result, children make the best use of the carefully organised activities, which allow them to follow their interests. Children's early language and number skills develop well.
- The Reception class had a change of teacher at Easter, as the previous post-holder was offered a promotion at another school. Leaders and governors managed to arrange temporary appointments until the end of the summer term, with a new substantive teacher to be appointed to start in September. This interim measure is providing effective provision this term, although leaders have firm plans to re-energise provision once stability is restored next term.
- The percentage of children achieving a good level of development this summer is lower than in previous years, although the majority of children have made good progress from their lower starting points in September.
- My final line of enquiry was about the quality of pupils' work across the wider curriculum. The curriculum is carefully planned, with lots of useful information on the school's website to help parents support learning at home. Pupils enjoy their learning, which encompasses lots of art work and imaginatively planned topics such as Life in Elizabethan Times, Into the Secret Garden and Wild and Wonderful. When we visited classes, we saw some pupils designing and cooking their own pizzas and others making their own colour palettes and exploring techniques such as pointillism to create still life paintings of flowers.
- Nevertheless, when we looked in pupils' topic books together, it was clear that the quality and presentation of written work, especially in history and geography, does not fully reflect the depth of pupils' learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- recent improvements to the teaching of mathematics are secured, so that even more pupils attain greater depth
- the extremely high standards of provision in the pre-school are shared across the whole of the early years
- the presentation of work in history and geography reflects the depth of pupils' learning
- steps are taken to improve communications, especially with the significant minority of parents who have expressed concerns about the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicholas Rudman
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you to discuss the school's priorities for development and the impact of actions taken since the previous inspection. I met the leaders who have responsibility for physical education and the pre-school. In addition, I met with two governors, including the chair of the governing body, and I spoke on the telephone to a representative from the local authority's school improvement service. I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including the school's self-evaluation document, plans and records for the use of additional funding, and the school's assessment information. I checked the school's safeguarding and child-protection procedures, the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with pupils, and information relating to attendance. I undertook joint observations of learning across the school, looked at work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons. I analysed the 30 responses to Ofsted's online survey Parent View, as well as the 30 free-text questionnaire responses from parents. I spoke with parents informally before the school day and I analysed the responses from nine staff giving their views of the school.