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Mrs Sandra Lewis
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Dear Mrs Lewis

Short inspection of Russell Street School

Following my visit to the school on 10 January 2017, 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 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have made changes that have had a positive impact on pupils' learning and achievement. In 2015, key stage 1 outcomes were well above average. Similarly, in 2016, despite key stage 1 national assessments being more challenging, the proportion of pupils reaching age-related expectations in reading and mathematics was well above average. However, you recognise that outcomes in writing in 2016 were not as strong as you intended them to be, especially for boys. In response, you are sensibly developing new approaches to the teaching of writing, which assist pupils in better utilising their knowledge of spelling, punctuation and grammar. However, new approaches to writing are not yet improving pupils' spelling as much as other aspects. In addition, in 2016, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils exceeding age-related expectations was also below that of others nationally. You have taken swift action to remedy this. You have developed the curriculum, increasing opportunities for pupils to apply their skills. You now have very clear sight of the journey that pupils need to make in their writing skills from Nursery to the end of Year 2. Your clarity has helped you to structure your plans for learning more effectively.

Since the previous inspection, you have significantly strengthened subject and senior leaders' skills and also appointed some new leaders. New leaders have implemented effective approaches to teaching, which they monitor carefully. Of note is the way leaders use a wide range of evidence about the quality of teaching,

to ensure that the support and challenge they give teachers is sharp and insightful. In response to the removal of national curriculum levels, you have also developed a bespoke approach to assessment. This approach ensures that pupils are given opportunities to apply their skills at a deeper level. It also enables teachers to identify accurately any gaps pupils have in their learning.

Pupils strive to fulfil their potential because of the positive attitudes you have inculcated. Pupils at your school are thoughtful and have a strong work ethic. When observing learning in class, I noticed how hard pupils were working and the focused questions they asked their teachers about their work. The type of questions pupils asked indicated that they were keen to discover the very best ways of completing the tasks the teacher set them. Parents also treasure the quality of education your school provides. The vast majority were overwhelmingly positive in their written responses to Ofsted's online survey. Parents particularly value the way you provide high-quality care and guidance, including before- and after- school care. Comments such as, 'Russell Street is a lovely school, providing a safe and nurturing environment in which my son feels happy and is encouraged to learn, play and be creative' were typical.

You have successfully developed those areas identified for improvement in the previous inspection report, which also recognised the many strengths in your school. In particular, pupils have developed their reading skills well. Consequently, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the Year1 phonics check has improved since 2015, so that in 2016, it was well above average. In order to make better links between reading and writing, older pupils are able to identify how writers arouse different emotions in their readers. Governors are supporting your work in these areas well. A number of governors are helpfully undertaking additional relevant training in literacy. This additional expertise is helping governors to ensure that their checks are well-focused and rigorous. In addition, you have developed all aspects of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) learning. Pupils' knowledge and understanding of other cultures has been enhanced through the well-established links you have forged with other schools around the world. These links, along with additional training on positive approaches to learning, have helped pupils in becoming reflective, thoughtful and resilient.

Safeguarding is effective.

Your safeguarding work is effective because of how well you know the needs of the pupils and their families, as well as any relevant issues in the local neighbourhood. You use this thorough knowledge to ensure that pupils get the help they require to stay safe. This includes additional support from the local authority, where necessary. For example, you have wisely sought the authority's assistance on the very rare occasions when pupils' behaviour in school has given you cause for concern about their well-being. Likewise, the strong relationships your staff, (including staff running before- and after- school clubs) have with pupils, and parents, help the school to monitor pupils' attendance closely. You can fully account for some pupils' high rates of absence last year. Indeed, in some cases, absence figures were high because you rightly refused to take pupils off the school's roll until their next school place had been fully confirmed.

You and other designated leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are of high quality and detailed. Your staff vigilantly record all concerns they have about pupils. You collate and analyse these effectively. You have successfully enhanced this analysis by introducing a coding system which enables you to make links and see any patterns. As a result, you are crystal-clear about what safeguarding information needs to be passed on to pupils' next school when they leave in Year 2. You also sensibly ensure that staff are given the information they need about individual pupil's needs and are also kept abreast of the most relevant, latest guidance through regular additional briefings.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on the key lines of enquiry agreed at our first meeting. These included the leadership of early years with reference to the proportion of disadvantaged children reaching a good level of development, the sustainability of improvements in phonics, the impact of leaders' work to improve outcomes for different groups, as well as the effectiveness of actions to improve pupils' attendance and writing. In addition, one key line of enquiry was focused on the overall culture of the school, including SMSC. I also considered the impact of the school's work in keeping children safe.
- Children learn well in early years because leaders ensure that they provide well-planned opportunities for them to develop a range of skills, including literacy and numeracy skills. Children's skills are enhanced through the probing questions key workers ask while they play in small groups. This approach provides effective opportunities for additional learning and discussion. It also helps children meet both the academic, as well as the social, challenges of Year 1.
- The proportion of disadvantaged children reaching a good level of development in 2016 shows an improvement on 2015. You are monitoring this on an individual basis and providing targeted children with additional support.
- Teaching in phonics in Year 1 is effective because sessions are carefully planned and enable pupils to make links between the sounds letters make and their shapes. Pupils are given carefully considered opportunities to apply their understanding of these links in their own writing. Teachers keep pupils' early attempts at writing and make good use of them when assessing pupils' progress.
- New leaders have made effective changes to assessment, which include developing bespoke and highly detailed key performance indicators. Teachers use these to build up a refined and sophisticated understanding of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. In particular, leaders and teachers are clear about the level of challenge most-able pupils require to achieve greater depth in their assessments. Teachers' predictions for 2017 suggest that the proportion of pupils exceeding age-related expectations in key stage 1 national assessments will rise.
- The school had developed successful approaches to help pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, with gaps in their learning, meet their challenging targets. Leaders rigorously monitor the impact of these initiatives in special review meetings. For example, additional support in mathematics is developing pupils' reasoning skills and pupils receive well-planned help to advance their reading skills.
- The teaching of writing is improving because pupils are beginning to use

grammatical forms in their writing to create a specific effect on the reader. However, some pupils who are confident in crafting their writing so that it is engaging are not equally as strong at spelling. They do not always make good enough use of the knowledge gained about spelling from their phonics lessons. In addition, teachers do not always build on this knowledge well enough.

- The school is boosting pupils' involvement in learning. In addition, strong links with schools in other countries are developing pupils' sense of empathy and providing them with a wider prospective.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- further develop approaches to spelling so all pupils, including most-able disadvantaged pupils, fulfil their potential in assessments.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with subject leaders and separately with senior leaders. I also met with the vice-chair of the governing body and four other governors. I met separately with a representative from local authority. I made a telephone call to the chair of the governing body and visited the after-school club. Short visits were made to a number of lessons, including phonics, to observe teaching and look at work in pupils' books. On most occasions, visits were accompanied by the headteacher. I observed pupils' behaviour in a range of situations, including in lessons and around school. The 109 responses parents made in response to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 49 comments made via free-text were considered. I also considered the 25 responses to the staff questionnaire. I analysed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the latest improvement plan, information about pupils' progress and safeguarding documentation.