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Mr Phil Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Smith

Short inspection of Merriott First School

Following my visit to the school on 17 March 2016, 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 December 2010.

This school continues to be good.

You have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Since your arrival in September 2015, you have worked hard to start implementing the changes necessary to improve the school further. Your insightful, detailed analyses of the quality of teaching and pupils' learning are precise and accurate. Your vision for improvement is shared with staff, governors and parents who support you fully. All reported to me that improved communication, timely feedback and greater clarity are now the norm. The words 'open and transparent' were used to describe your leadership.

Your clear focus on improving an environment that enables effective learning to take place is apparent when entering most classrooms. Pupils routinely use the prompts and guidance displayed on classroom 'working walls' as reference points to help them overcome barriers to learning. Strategies to develop pupils' resilience and concentration are further improving their attitude to learning alongside the quality and quantity of their work, particularly in the Years 3 and 4 class. Pupils understand that such skills will stand them in good stead for the next phase of their education. Interesting activities, matched precisely to pupils' learning, result in extremely high standards of behaviour and productivity.

You are determined that pupils will do as well as they can academically and in their personal development. Regular checks on the progress individual pupils are making are used to inform practice, plan training and bring about improvements to the quality of teaching and the curriculum. As a result of your precise feedback, teachers are using the information gleaned from initial assessment tasks more

precisely. Sequences of lessons are building on pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding and plugging gaps in pupils' learning effectively. You have now identified that middle leaders need to contribute to the process of monitoring and evaluation as well as take on a greater role in wider school improvement. You have devised plans, including those for improving their skills of conducting lesson observations, analysing pupils' work and providing developmental feedback to staff.

When pupils leave in Year 4, they do so with very secure subject knowledge, especially in reading and writing. Attainment has been well above average in these areas in recent years. Pupils reach good standards in the Year 1 phonics (the sounds that letters represent) check and go on to spell more complex words accurately as they move through the school. Historically, pupils' skills in mathematics have not been as strong as in other subject areas. You, your staff and governors are working hard to match pupils' performance in this subject to other areas. Some early success is beginning to emerge. Disadvantaged pupils, though very small in number, achieve well. Their attainment compares favourably with that of pupils from non-disadvantaged backgrounds.

Safeguarding is effective.

You know individual pupils and their families very well. Close liaison with external agencies ensures that detailed background information is established when concerns arise. This ensures that you fully understand the best path and approach to take for each circumstance. When incidents arise, you are quick to learn from them by reviewing your procedures and building in learning opportunities for all staff and pupils. Consequently, pupils show a good understanding of safety, and all parents who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their child is safe in school. Staff are well trained in identifying pupils who are at risk from physical or emotional neglect or abuse. Overall, you have ensured that all child protection arrangements are fit for purpose and records are of high quality.

Governors take safeguarding seriously. The governor with responsibility for safeguarding meets with you regularly to ask pertinent questions to assure herself that the arrangements are secure. Staff and governors have considered fully the Prevent duty and have discussed how best to meet this duty for children in the early years. All necessary procedures are carried out to confirm that those who work with children are suitable. You are aware that further improvements are required to the general organisation and filing of pre-employment checks so that they are readily available when needed.

Inspection findings

- You, your staff and governors are immensely proud of your school community. You are sensitive in your approach but not complacent. This belief creates a culture where everything is shared and all feel that there is room for collective improvement. Your passion for the school and pupils' learning spreads across to staff at all levels. Everyone is keen to develop and play their part fully in securing further improvements.
- You draw on your local network of outstanding schools well to identify what can be learned from the latest educational thinking or through conducting joint moderation activities. New ideas are carefully considered and shared with staff. Teachers work closely to moderate pupils' work or benefit from training and sharing their expertise.
- You are concerned that some boys in Reception class are finding it hard to make effective relationships and have questioned why. Teachers and adults observe pupils interacting and record aspects of their learning in different areas of the curriculum. Currently, the quality of these observations is not identifying precisely enough the specific interests of boys, or their next steps in learning. Activities planned are therefore not meeting their needs carefully enough.
- Staff spoken to are fully supportive of your leadership. They are happy to be a member of the school team and this is evident in their work. Teaching is monitored through a variety of means and a range of information. Records of lesson observations provide some specific evaluations of pupils' learning. This information is fed back in a timely manner and discussed through regular professional development meetings to bring about the desired improvement.
- Governors provide a good degree of challenge for the school. They find out about what is typically happening through regular visits. Minutes of meetings illustrate frequent checks and questioning on operational and strategic matters. Governors are now receiving much more comprehensive information about the performance of pupils in the school. They are becoming increasingly familiar with the key messages from the headteacher's report and local authority notes of visits.
- Your governors have rightly asked why standards in mathematics are not matching those achieved in other subject areas. Our joint observations of learning in lessons pointed to some variation in practice across the school. Precise questioning to check pupils' knowledge, identify misconceptions and help pupils overcome barriers to learning was not always evident. Activities planned provide a growing number of mathematical problems and tasks to complete. However, teaching is not yet equipping pupils with the learning strategies to solve problems and to reason mathematically about their chosen method. This is particularly the case for the most-able pupils and is holding them back from reaching their full potential.

- When we looked at pupils' writing books together, you were quick to identify the lack of variety in the range of writing being covered. Your efforts on improving narrative writing are proving successful in the Years 3 and 4 class, especially for boys, but the curriculum remains too narrow. The over-reliance of 'toolkits', aimed at helping pupils structure their writing, is limiting pupils' ability to fully develop a broader range of writing techniques, particularly when writing non-fiction.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- all pupils are challenged and stretched to reach their full potential by:
 - equipping pupils with the skills and strategies required to solve mathematical problems systematically and reason about their approaches and answers
 - giving pupils experience in writing for a broader range of fiction and non-fiction purposes
- the quality of teaching is further improved by:
 - ensuring that outcomes of planned activities are used to identify misconceptions and to reshape learning in mathematics lessons
 - reviewing the use of toolkits to aid pupils' writing.
- middle leaders play a greater part in checking on the work of the school and securing improvements in the quality of teaching and pupils' learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Light
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, 10 members of staff and pupils. I spoke with six representatives from the governing body. I accompanied you on visits to lessons and together we looked at work in pupils' books. I took into account the survey results from Parent View, the online questionnaire for parents, together with responses from pupils and staff. I spoke with pupils from across the school to discuss their work and gain their views of the school. I evaluated the accuracy of your self-evaluation and reviewed a range of other documentation. I checked the effectiveness of your safeguarding and recruitment arrangements.