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Mrs Hayley Dyer
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Dear Mrs Dyer

Short inspection of Crays Hill Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 December 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

School leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Crays Hill Primary is a well-organised and welcoming school in which pupils are able to develop greater confidence in their learning and social skills.

The school continues to experience considerable variations in its pupil cohorts. During the course of each school year, significantly higher proportions of pupils join or leave the school than is nationally the case. While pupils are on roll, you and your leaders monitor their progress meticulously and use this information to amend the curriculum appropriately. Good-quality teaching, learning and assessment ensure that pupils, almost all of whom are supported by pupil premium funding, make good progress in their time at school from individual starting points that are significantly below those of their peers nationally.

The previous inspection report identified that arrangements for supporting pupils, including those who return from travelling, were excellent. This remains a strong aspect of your work. You carefully identify what each pupil knows and can do when they join the school. You establish pupils' levels of skill and confidence in English and mathematics, and then ensure that teachers craft learning that is typically well matched to the needs of each pupil. You track pupils' achievement closely, so that you can judge who is making good progress and take appropriate action if any pupils fall behind.

Pupils welcome the support they get and explained how they are helped to catch up after any periods of absence. They increasingly understand the value of their education. One pupil commented that, 'learning is hard sometimes, but it will make life easier later on', and others agreed.

It is a positive feature of your leadership that you continually reflect on the quality of provision and take appropriate action to improve the aspects requiring adjustment. The previous report noted that pupils' skills in mathematics were not as well developed as those in English. Due to the training that you have provided, teachers now plan learning opportunities that help pupils to develop their number skills using practical as well as written methods. As a result, pupils learn and apply new mathematical skills more confidently and accurately than was previously the case.

The strength of your leadership identified at the previous inspection at the school remains. Two years ago, on returning after a period of planned absence, you raised the standards of behaviour, which had declined. You have been largely successful and the standards of behaviour seen throughout the inspection were good. School records demonstrate that this is increasingly typical at Crays Hill. The number of exclusions has fallen dramatically over the past two years.

Pupils quickly grasp and understand the school's expected learning behaviours ('effort, respect, independence and communication') represented by the school mascot, 'ERIC the elf'. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are well provided for. This was evident, for example, when pupils were learning about Africa, different faiths, or reflecting on the important ingredients for successful friendships. Pupils are typically well mannered, respectful and work collaboratively. They generally respond to teachers' instructions well and show increasing resilience in their learning. If pupils make poor behaviour choices, they have the opportunity to reflect on their actions. As a result, pupils who have previously found it difficult to make positive behaviour choices demonstrate increasing self-discipline and thoughtfulness.

Pupils of all ages take part in lunchtime activities such as skipping and tennis with good humour and great energy. Pupils explained to me that they appreciate the activities they experience across the curriculum. They enjoy swimming and dance sessions, as well as visits to a local education centre where they work with pupils from other schools. One pupil commented that, 'the school has taught me that if I put my mind to it I can do anything'. This positive sentiment was evident in the attitudes of many pupils, who value the consistency and care shown to them by the adults. Pupils and adults are enthusiastically proud of their school and value your work, as their headteacher.

Pupils' attendance remains a challenge for leaders due to the regular absences that occur when pupils travel away from the area with their families for extended periods of time. School leaders take many positive and supportive measures to help pupils attend as regularly as possible and ensure that any children missing education are followed up rigorously. Your actions have recently led to an increase in attendance and a significant decrease in the number of pupils who are persistently absent. However, attendance remains below average.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong safeguarding culture at Crays Hill Primary School. Leaders, including governors, have successfully created an environment in which pupils feel safe and are safe. Records, including the school's single central register of checks on adults' suitability to work with children, are maintained carefully and accurately. Leaders keep careful records of actions taken when they have concerns about the well-being of pupils. These records show that leaders take appropriate actions to care for any vulnerable children. Adults have appropriate safeguarding training, including training on the government's 'Prevent' duty. Consequently, adults know what to do if they have concerns about the pupils' well-being.

Pupils comment that there is a strong sense of community, and that they trust the adults who work with them. Pupils explain confidently how they are taught to act safely, for example when using the internet. They told me that, through activities such as the fire safety visit, they now understand how to keep themselves safe in different situations.

Pupils understand different forms of bullying and explain that bullying is something that is not common at their school. Were it to occur, pupils have faith that adults will deal with it swiftly and appropriately. While there were no parental responses on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, parents spoken with on the day of inspection expressed confidence in the level of care provided by the school. These views are supported in your own records of pupils' and parents' opinions.

Inspection findings

- Crays Hill has undergone a period of considerable change since the previous inspection. A new deputy headteacher was appointed and has since left. You had a period of planned absence. Four teachers have left and three have joined the school. In addition, the number of pupils on roll continues to fluctuate. In the last academic year, 85 pupils arrived or left the school during the academic year. You recognised that, as a result of the staffing changes, the behaviour of some pupils deteriorated and the rate of exclusions was too high. When you returned to school two years ago, you re-established your high expectations. As a result, the behaviour of pupils is now typically good.

- Governance is a strength of the school. Governors are knowledgeable and experienced in both education and business. Inspection evidence indicates that the governing body uses this knowledge to good effect to support and challenge you and your leaders in your work. Governors visit school to assure themselves of the accuracy of the information that you provide them. Governors share your long-term and deeply held ambition for the academic and social success of all the pupils in your care.
- In this small school, leadership is shared among all staff. You, and others, are currently taking on additional work while governors seek to appoint a deputy headteacher. While this is manageable in the short term, and the school is improving, you and your governors recognise the importance of making this appointment in the coming months to ensure that the good-quality education is maintained and further improved upon.
- Middle leaders are enthusiastic and effective in their work. They make appropriate adjustments to the curriculum to ensure that pupils have equality of opportunity. Leaders have made skilful changes to the English and mathematics curriculum so that pupils experience learning that challenges and interests them. While leaders track the progress that pupils make in English and mathematics in forensic detail, you acknowledge that you need to review, with the same rigour, the progress that pupils make in other subjects.
- Teachers adapt learning activities to meet the varying needs of the frequently changing pupil cohorts. They deploy teaching assistants well to support pupils in their learning. Pupils develop confidence in their learning across the curriculum due to the firm, sensitive support of the adults. An example of good support was when a teaching assistant's persistent questioning and encouragement enabled pupils in a mixed-age class to apply the grammatical rules that they were learning accurately and confidently. These pupils were delighted with their success.
- Children enter the school with skills significantly below those of their peers nationally. In the early years, they make clear progress in their social and academic skills. This is because adults skilfully plan activities that enable children to learn and consolidate their skills, including those of communication, number and literacy. Children enjoy learning, learn routines quickly and behave well.
- Standards in phonics at the end of Year 1 have risen for the low numbers of pupils taking the screening check since the previous inspection. This is because teachers use their good subject knowledge and clear enunciation to deliver interesting and effective phonics sessions. Almost all of the pupils who took the phonics screening check at the end of Year 2 achieved the expected standard.
- There are many opportunities for pupils to read. Pupils, many of whom have little prior experience of reading, read accurately and often enthusiastically. They use the skills they have developed in their phonics sessions very well to make out words that are unfamiliar to them. However, many pupils' reading skills, while rapidly improving, remain below those expected for their age.

- Due to the very small numbers of pupils who take external assessments at the end of each key stage, it is not possible to make robust, valid comparisons with national averages. Inspection evidence, including school assessment information and a scrutiny of pupils' work demonstrates that pupils make good progress from their individual starting points across a range of subjects, including English and mathematics. However, some pupils still require considerable encouragement to persevere with their writing and to use clear and well-formed handwriting.
- You and your governors make good use of the support of external agencies. Through the work of a consultant special educational needs coordinator, you provide well for the very small number of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The pupils' needs are accurately identified and communicated clearly to teachers. Teachers plan learning that enables the pupils to make good progress from very low starting points. You track precisely the academic and social progress of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, including, in some cases, the progress made in very small steps.
- Almost every pupil currently on roll is eligible for support through the additional government funding to improve the progress for disadvantaged pupils. You use this funding effectively, for example by developing personalised literacy and numeracy programmes to help these pupils to catch up with their peers. Your comprehensive monitoring demonstrates that the one-to-one support enables them to develop their literacy and numeracy skills well.
- Leaders are aware that, while the school's website is compliant, some information is not as up to date as it could be and does not always reflect the work taking place in the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- leaders continue their work to improve pupils' attendance
- leaders review the progress that pupils make in other subjects as rigorously as they review pupils' progress in English and mathematics
- all teachers provide opportunities for pupils to develop and practise their handwriting, and to write at length
- information on the school's website is regularly updated and accurately reflects the work taking place in 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 Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

On this inspection I considered how well pupils are inducted into school, how well they progress in their learning, how effectively leaders are improving the attendance of pupils and the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding procedures.

I met with you, your school business manager, two middle leaders, five governors, the consultant special educational needs coordinator and a group of seven pupils. During two tours of the school with you, I visited each class to observe pupils' learning. I looked at pupils' work in their books and around the school. I analysed documentation relating to the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans; the school's analysis of pupils' progress, attendance and behaviour; the school's safeguarding policy and practice; governance; parents', staff's and pupils' perceptions; and the use of pupil premium funding. I took account of the views of parents and pupils who spoke with me over the course of the inspection.