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20 April 2017

Mrs Donna Jolly
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jolly

Short inspection of Middleton School

Following my visit to the school on 23 March 2017 with Janet Tomkins, Ofsted Inspector, 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 outstanding in January 2013.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have continued to drive excellence across the school and staff embrace your ethos of high aspirations for all. You are highly ambitious for your pupils and have a deep commitment to the school. Leaders and staff have meticulous knowledge about pupils in the school and their individual needs and circumstances. This enables them to pinpoint exactly what pupils need in order to make excellent progress from their starting points, both in their academic and personal development.

The school environment is exceptionally well cared for and staff take great pride in ensuring that learning areas are of the highest standard. Pupils' work is celebrated on walls and corridors across the school, building their self-esteem, confidence and motivation. Consequently, the school is a bright, cheerful, vibrant, colourful and delightful place to learn. Parents are very complimentary about the welcoming, friendly atmosphere which permeates the school. They recognise the 'extra mile' that staff go in order to support their children in their learning and development.

Well-established routines ensure that classes are calm, purposeful and rooted in learning. Pupils are extremely polite and well-mannered to staff and their peers. Their conduct in lessons and around the school is exemplary. Skilled and compassionate staff ensure that pupils thrive and are happy in their learning. Pupils trust the adults who work with them, so any initial fear of failure is swiftly

overcome. Mistakes are seen as learning opportunities, with success celebrated at every given opportunity to encourage learning.

Many parents speak admiringly of the school and recognise the efforts of the staff to ensure that their children thrive and succeed. The vast majority who expressed a view would recommend the school to another parent and agreed that their children are happy, well cared for and feel safe.

Members of the governing body are ambitious for the school. They confidently support and challenge, holding leaders to account. They have an excellent understanding of the range and needs of the pupils through their frequent visits. The rigorous checks they make ensure that they have a precise understanding of the school's strengths, and of those areas where further improvement is necessary.

At the last inspection, the only area identified for improvement was to ensure that the teaching of language skills, for pupils with speech, language and communication difficulties, was well resourced and as effective as the teaching of phonics. This has now been fully addressed. Since the last inspection, the senior leadership team has been relentless in moving the school forwards even further. In particular, there has been a greater focus on increasing the learning time in the community, the introduction of curriculum focus weeks, the establishment of pupil 'talking groups' and further development of the sensory approaches to learning. Leaders have responded successfully to the national changes in the curriculum and have created their own purpose-made system of assessing pupils' progress. You also provide high-quality outreach support to other schools, without compromising the core work of providing outstanding learning for pupils in the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team places pupils' safety at the heart of the school's work. You make rigorous checks on the suitability of all members of staff and other adults who work in the school. You have recently updated your safeguarding policy, taking into account the latest guidance, and have provided appropriate training for governors and members of staff. Risk assessments are thorough. Staff new to the school have safeguarding as part of their induction. All staff are encouraged to be vigilant and, where necessary, to report concerns. Pupils say they feel safe. They know who to turn to for support, or if any concerns arise. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Bullying is rare and pupils were quick to inform the inspectors that if any issues did arise, they knew who to talk to so that teachers would be quick to resolve them. Staff supervise pupils diligently throughout the day and are highly visible at breaktimes.

A high number of pupils travel to and from school by organised transportation. Leaders have ensured that this is well organised and that pupils are safeguarded from risks. Staff, drivers and escorts carry out their responsibilities carefully, respecting pupils' dignity throughout. They ensure that each pupil is welcomed and is actively engaged in conversation as they wait to enter class. The school site is safe and secure.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry in order to ascertain that the school remained outstanding focused on how effectively you and other leaders prepare pupils for the next stage in their education. The family support liaison officer provides effective home–school support and is a strength to the school. Your robust internal transition arrangements ensure that pupils move seamlessly from one year group to the next. Staff provide a wealth of opportunities to help pupils manage everyday situations more effectively, including the use of transport and money. Extra-curricular activities inspire pupils to develop self-esteem, interpersonal skills, problem-solving and decision-making. Offsite visits support pupils' independence in the community and are related to the work completed in school. Leaders go to great lengths to ensure that pupils at the end of key stage 2 make successful transitions to their chosen school. A dedicated staff team ensures that a wide range of rich, well organised, programmes are in place. You provide outstanding support for pupils academically and help them develop a range of life skills, to give them the best possible start in their next stage of education.
- My second line of enquiry focused on how well leaders and managers ensure that pupils' communication skills in lessons develop at a suitable rate. The sensitive approach used by staff to help pupils improve their communication is extremely impressive. Highly trained and skilled staff use effective communication techniques to offer appropriate support to pupils, enabling them to communicate as successfully as they can. Staff know their pupils extremely well. Staff use many different methods to help pupils communicate, in order to help them actively participate in and understand their learning. This includes speech, sign language, communication cue cards, symbols and gestures, the use of sensory resources to promote verbal responses, sequential language and the use of information and communication technology; all of which are highly effective in helping pupils learn. Pupils treat each other with sensitivity and respect when sharing ideas and listening to each other's answers. All moments of communication are recognised, acknowledged, valued, listened to and celebrated, resulting in pupils being confident communicators.
- My third key line of enquiry concentrated on the impact of leadership on improving pupils' attendance and the welfare arrangements of the youngest children in the early years. You and other leaders, including governors, recognise the significance of attendance in keeping children safe and giving them the very best opportunity to achieve well in school. It is clear that staff do all they can to make sure that pupils attend regularly and they involve the attendance officer when necessary. For some pupils, due to medical reasons, attendance is sometimes sporadic. Careful checks of the school's records of attendance showed that the vast majority of pupils do not take time off school without good cause. Pupils enjoy their learning and want to be at the school. One parent commented, 'My son asks on a Saturday why it is not a Monday as he wants to be at school.'
- The well-being of each pupil is at the heart of the school's work. Relationships between the pupils, staff and parents are a strength. The early years provides an extremely caring and nurturing environment. Leaders are skilled at identifying the needs of children when they start school. They use information about children

effectively, to plan activities that capture their imagination. Staff are highly competent at helping children to develop the skills they need to be successful learners. They raise children's self-esteem and self-confidence quickly, so that they are willing to take an active part in school life. You create a stimulating learning environment for the children, in which they can learn and play effectively. You have provided them with their own playground and ensure that they go to lunch earlier. Adults are kind and manage the behaviour of children in a very low-key, kind, subtle and effective way. The excellent work of the school family support liaison officer with parents and carers ensures that the well-being and learning of all children continues to be a high priority for the school. There is a strong emphasis on keeping safe and how to stay safe for the younger children.

- The final line of enquiry focused on how well the school promotes a culture for safeguarding the children. That is reported on earlier in this letter.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they promote the system of monitoring the progress of pupils, using the scale devised by the school, in order to provide opportunities for moderation.

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

Yours sincerely

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your deputy headteacher to discuss the key lines of enquiry. You and your deputy headteacher joined me and the team inspector to observe learning in classrooms. I observed pupils at breaktime. I met with a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body; held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority; and met a group of pupils selected by you from all year groups. I scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, school improvement plan and the school website. I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, the school's self-assessment procedures and information relating to attendance. I read through the 11 comments placed by parents on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, considered the school's own survey of pupils, and spoke to staff and parents informally.