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Mrs Natalie Fowler
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Fowler

Short inspection of Knowles Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 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 June 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment, you have worked tirelessly with the staff and the local authority to steer the school through a challenging time. Your work is highly valued by governors, who recognise your achievement in sustaining a high standard of education and care for the children. The chair of the governing body visits the school regularly to see it in action and challenge leaders about the impact of their work.

It is clear that you have the confidence of parents and staff. Parents who I spoke to at the start of the day were highly forthcoming in their praise for the school. They appreciate the welcoming setting and the good progress their children make. One parent said, 'My daughter loves the responsibility she is given at the nursery.'

The school environment is highly stimulating, with plenty of interesting activities for children to choose, both indoors and outdoors. Children develop their independence and social skills rapidly within the calm, friendly school community. For example, children are encouraged to choose when to go into the snack room. An adult is closely at hand to assist them with their choice of healthy snack. The promotion of children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development remains a strength of the school – a feature that was evident at the previous inspection.

You have taken effective action to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the

previous inspection. There are now robust procedures in place for measuring children's progress at an individual as well as at a group level. You have refined the activities for the most able children by introducing a higher level of challenge for them in your weekly planning.

Adults use learning journeys effectively to record children's level of involvement in activities as well as any observations about their well-being. This helps adults to direct activities to meet children's needs more closely. However, the progress children make in reading and writing is slower than in other areas of learning. This is because of the limited ability of some children to articulate what they are thinking and feeling in complete sentences. Not all adults help children develop rapidly enough by making the most of opportunities to talk and think together, both indoors and outdoors.

Leaders and governors evaluate the school's strengths and weaknesses accurately, based on a careful audit that you and your team have skilfully carried out. You recognise that by improving their attendance, children will have a better chance of making rapid progress. You are already taking action, such as contacting parents on the first day of their child's absence, but acknowledge the need for more work with parents and carers to ensure that all children attend school regularly. Similarly, the governing body has identified the need for additional training for new governors so they can play an important role in supporting school improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, along with your staff, have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and meet statutory requirements. Staff and parents say wholeheartedly that children are safe, happy and nurtured well. You hold detailed records relating to children whose circumstances are a cause for concern, and track all communication with families and external agencies carefully. Your team supervises children diligently on arrival and at home time, ensuring that every child is safe. All staff take great care to make sure that parents are contacted before a child is released into someone else's care. You rightly ensure that children learn to keep themselves safe, and have recently organised a visit to introduce the community police officer who they can approach for help. You carry out fire drills regularly and staff check the safety of the equipment and environment regularly.

Staff and governors have received training on safeguarding children and know what to do if they have concerns. The staff understand that safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility and discuss concerns promptly with you. They know they can contact the local authority directly if needed.

Inspection findings

- Practitioners work well together and plan on a weekly basis. They assess children's skills more accurately than in the past, and identify how much progress they are making. As a result, future tasks are matched well to individual needs and enable all children, including the youngest, to explore ideas and learn.

- Most staff have a secure understanding of the age group they are working with and extend children's language by engaging with them in activities. This is not consistently so, however, and leaders have identified children's early literacy skills through language development as an area for further improvement.
- Adults have high expectations of what each child, including the most able and the most able disadvantaged, can achieve. This was seen, for example, when a two-year-old disadvantaged child who has a special educational need rolled a ball down a spiral tube, exploring what happened next. The adult challenged the child by talking about the activity with them. This helped the child to sustain the activity for a longer period.
- Children engage in a variety of interesting activities, initiated by themselves or led by adults. All activities are well resourced and structured to meet the needs of children with different starting points, helping them all to make good progress. For example, the 'mud kitchen' aimed at developing children's imagination and coordination is resourced well with pots, pans and a small microwave. Children use equipment confidently to make 'chocolate cakes' and mud pies.
- More than half of the children meet their age-related expectations by the end of their time in the school. Some exceed the expectations in their personal and physical development. Leaders identify that some children make less rapid progress and achieve below expectations because they do not attend the school regularly.
- Children whose circumstances make them vulnerable receive high-quality support from teaching assistants as well as key persons. Staff provide time and space for these children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings to adults, whether through words, pictures or actions. As a result, they make good progress and the differences in their achievement are diminishing rapidly.
- The most able children are challenged to think critically, and make rapid gains in their knowledge and understanding. For example, the senior teacher showed a keen interest in the mud cake a child was mixing and extended his knowledge of the ingredients that would make the cake even more 'delicious'.
- Staff have high expectations and this leads to all children, regardless of their starting points, making good progress. For example, in one class children were able to recognise random letters of the alphabet and articulate the sounds these letters make.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- there are enriched opportunities for children to develop their speaking skills, so they can communicate their ideas for a variety of purposes including for reading and writing
- staff foster effective home–school links that remove barriers to regular attendance for some children
- new governors receive appropriate training to strengthen the quality of support and challenge they provide to school leaders.

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

Kusum Trikha
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, three members of the governing body, including the chair, and an adviser from the local authority. I also had discussions with parents to seek their views of the school. I observed teaching and learning with you and your senior teacher, both indoors and outside. In addition, I made a few shorter visits to different sessions to observe children playing and learning. I looked at examples of children's work and spoke to the children. I also reviewed a range of documentation, including the single central record, leaders' own evaluations of the school's effectiveness, the development plan and the school's own information about children's progress. I also took account of 14 responses to the online Ofsted questionnaires completed by parents and staff.