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Mr Michael Fearnhead
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Fearnhead

Short inspection of Belswains Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 September 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Belswains Primary has continued to ensure that pupils develop both academically and socially. The school's ethos, 'learning and growing together' is evident in the ways in which pupils interact and support each other in the classroom. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the quality of education provided by staff. This is evident in the many positive comments made by parents who described the school as 'amazing', 'marvellous' and 'a fantastic, friendly community school'.

Clear leadership, including that of governors, has focused on continuing to improve the quality of education provided to all pupils. You provide a strong vision of how the school can improve further. This is clearly defined in your school improvement plan and in the progress pupils are making.

Governance is rigorous. The governing body is well led and offers both critical challenge and support. Governors are as ambitious for the academic success and social and emotional well-being of pupils. Governors, particularly the chair of the governing body, are regular visitors to the school. Visits and meetings with you, your leadership team, staff and pupils allow governors to gather vital information. This information is evaluated carefully and used by governors to support and question leaders about the school's performance.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary both within the classroom and around the school.

They support each other both academically and socially with empathy and understanding. Pupils respond very well to teachers' high expectations and demonstrate enthusiasm and interest in lessons. You and your leadership team have ensured that pupils receive a well-rounded, balanced curriculum with opportunities to learn about how other people of different faiths and cultures live. As a result, pupils are interested and reflective of the world around them. You are preparing them to be highly engaged, effective members of 21st-century British society.

Mathematics is a strength of the school. Strong leadership at both senior and middle levels has ensured that pupils make good progress in mathematics and enjoy learning. External support from the local authority mathematics adviser has helped you to identify the areas that pupils struggle with. Consequently, teachers have improved the precision with which pupils develop mathematical reasoning and fluency. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress at both key stages 1 and 2. The proportion of pupils exceeding national expectations is also increasing.

You and your leadership team are alert to changes in pupils' progress and implement improvements where required. For example, as a result of your developments in the teaching of reading, progress at key stage 2 was in line with the national average in 2016. Inspection evidence demonstrated that you and your staff have further improved both pupils' progress and engagement in reading in 2017. In addition, the proportion of pupils at key stage 1 reaching the national standard in the phonics screening check has risen sharply and many pupils are now exceeding the national average. However, you recognise the need to continue to improve pupils' proficiency in reading for meaning at both key stages 1 and 2. You and your leadership team have already implemented plans to improve the teaching of reading through greater focus on developing pupils' vocabulary and their understanding of language. You have increased the regularity of teachers reading aloud to pupils across the curriculum to improve their vocabulary and language development. You also recognise that teachers are inconsistent in applying the school's policy for providing pupils with feedback and guidance about their work.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils speak very highly of the ways in which school leaders ensure their safety, and make school a happy place to learn. Pupils understand the importance of keeping safe when using the internet and are able to explain many of the strategies they have learned in assemblies and in computing lessons. All parents who responded to Ofsted's Parent View survey expressed their confidence in the school to keep their children safe, well cared for and content. Parents also agreed that leaders listen to their concerns and respond swiftly. One parent stated that the pupils are 'well looked after at all times'.

Pupils can define bullying and explain the different forms that it can take. They told me that bullying was not a common occurrence and that if it did happen, it would be dealt with quickly and appropriately. Pupils from different year groups mix well and support each other.

Leaders, including governors, ensure that all pupils are safe both within school and beyond. The school's safeguarding procedures are thorough. Checks on adults who work with pupils are rigorous and reviewed regularly. Evidence gathered during the inspection demonstrated that leaders ensure that vulnerable pupils receive the utmost support and care.

Inspection findings

- To ascertain that the school remained good, one of my key lines of enquiry was about pupils' achievements in reading at both key stages. Most pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, made progress in line with the national average at key stage 2 in 2016. However, the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, achieved below other pupils nationally at key stage 2. You agreed and explained how your leadership team had reviewed the teaching and learning of reading following the 2016 outcomes. As a result, you have introduced a well-designed approach to the teaching of vocabulary across the curriculum. You have also revised the ways in which pupils develop an understanding of the ideas conveyed in texts. Consequently, pupils are making better progress.
- As I visited classrooms and talked to your leadership team and pupils, the school's increased focus on developing pupils' understanding of what they read became evident. I observed pupils articulating their ideas about characters and themes in texts with increased understanding. For example, in a Year 2 class I observed pupils of all abilities talking and writing about the feelings of characters that they had inferred from the language used in the texts.
- You provide middle leaders, including your leader of English, with time and support to provide staff with training to improve their teaching of reading. They are also able to effectively monitor both the quality of teaching and learning and the tracking of pupils' progress and achievements. You and your leadership team use this information effectively to plan appropriate support. However, the quality of teacher guidance is inconsistent across year groups and key stages. In particular, the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils at key stage 2, are not challenged sufficiently to accelerate their reading skills and understanding.
- The newly constructed library is testament to your enhanced focus on developing pupils' enjoyment of reading. You ensure that each year group has a reading list from which they can select books. However, you acknowledge that pupils do not currently read for pleasure regularly.
- My second line of enquiry was about how leaders are ensuring that all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, receive a broad curriculum with a wide range of interesting subjects. You and your leadership team continually review the curriculum offered to all pupils at both key stages. As a consequence, you and your subject leaders have forged a strong curriculum that offers many rich cross-curricular links. For example, pupils make flatbread in their design and technology lessons to complement their study of the Ancient Greeks in Year 5.
- You have ensured that every subject has a subject leader to make improvements.

These leaders are provided with appropriate time and support to help them do this. They are able to draw on the skilled support of the local authority when necessary. Subject leaders regularly review the quality of teaching and learning in their subject area. As a result, pupils enjoy learning and make good progress in most areas of the curriculum. Changes to the religious studies curriculum have been reviewed and adapted to develop pupils' wider understanding of the ways in which different faiths shape people's perceptions of the world.

- You and your leadership team ensure that all pupils experience a range of trips and activities. For example, all pupils visited the Tate Modern in London to explore different forms of sculpture. Pupils spoke with great enthusiasm to me about a visit to a Stone Age re-enactment camp that helped them understand how fire was first made and how arrowheads were formed. Pupils' books showed a breadth of study that made links to other subject areas in every year group. However, guidance provided for pupils about how to improve their work, in line with school policy, is inconsistent.
- I also sought to establish how well pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities were progressing. The previous inspection report noted that staff did not consistently track and monitor their progress. You and your leadership team have improved this by ensuring that pupils' progress is regularly tracked and that appropriate intervention is implemented. In addition, you and your leaders frequently evaluate the impact of different approaches to support these pupils.
- You ensure that teaching assistants receive appropriate training and support to best meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. During classroom visits, I observed teaching assistants providing pupils with effective support through effective questioning and use of resources. As a result, all pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities can take part in all subjects and make progress in line with other pupils nationally.
- My final line of enquiry was about how well pupils keep themselves safe. Conduct in class and around the school is exemplary. Pupils are empathetic, friendly and welcoming to each other and adults. The curriculum helps pupils to keep safe in the world beyond school. They learn about e-safety and told me that these lessons help them keep safe when they are on the computer at home.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers provide more challenging work for the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, to increase their progress in reading
- teachers, in all subjects, provide effective guidance to promote pupils' progress with the same precision and rigour as they do in mathematics
- teachers continue to promote pupils' reading for enjoyment.

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

Susan Aykin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I held meetings with you, other senior and middle leaders and two governors.

I spoke with pupils informally in classrooms and when walking around the school site. I also met formally with a group of 12 pupils.

During two tours of the school with you, I visited each class and observed pupils at work.

I undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work in their books and folders.

Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined along with the school's record of checks carried out on staff working at the school.

A range of documents was analysed or discussed, including: the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans; documents relating to pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour; minutes of governors' meetings; and curriculum plans. I considered the views of 20 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as 18 parent views expressed via free-text.