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Mrs Helen Ruff
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ruff

Short inspection of The Ace Centre Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 20 March 2018, 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 September 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You are rightly proud of the school's long tradition of being at the forefront of early years education, resulting from its designation as one of the first seven early excellence centres in 1997, the first in a rural community. As you continue to build on this strong foundation, you are taking the school from strength to strength. Consequently, in 2015 the school became a designated teaching school and then a national support school the following year. The school is also a lead school in the Oxfordshire Teaching School Alliance. You are making sure that you contribute strongly to the latest research, working closely with a variety of partners, including Oxford University. Staff are also exceedingly dedicated to pursuing their own professional development. Many staff, on joining the school, embrace the plethora of learning opportunities on offer such as through undertaking a postgraduate certificate of education or a teacher training qualification.

Following the closure of the children's centre in February 2017, which was housed on the same site, you have had to steer the school through an unsettled period. Despite this setback, you, your governors and staff have remained resolutely dedicated to the local community. Indeed, you have all grasped the moment, seeking to work even more closely with other existing community groups, such as the town's library service. This school is justly highly regarded and, under your leadership, is in very capable hands.

A strong team ethos is unmistakable, with governors, leaders and staff all united in their ambition to serve the families of the local area well. Parents appreciate your strong-willed commitment and are appreciative of the outstanding education that their children continue to receive. In order to manage the closure of the children's centre, and maintain a high level of service to the surrounding community, everyone has worked over and beyond what is usually required. Governors recognise this and are now beginning to discuss staff workload with greater intent. They correctly identify that this is an aspect that could be improved further so they have, in recent times, proactively sought the views of the nursery's workforce in this regard. Governors and leaders acknowledge that all are still striving to find a sense of balance and equilibrium, while adjusting to the loss of the comprehensive services the children's centre once provided to families.

At the last inspection, the inspector identified many strengths and no areas that required improvement. You have continued to build on previous achievements and ensure that the quality of teaching and learning remains excellent. Strong parental partnerships are nurtured straight from the off and parents are rightly highly satisfied with the quality of care and education their children receive. Children, including the most vulnerable, achieve well, making rapid progress from their starting points in all areas of learning. All groups of children, including the most vulnerable, those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those at the early stages of learning English, make the same strong progress as their peers. By the time children leave, the vast majority achieve in line with age-related expectations and some exceed these expectations.

Safeguarding is effective.

The principle that all children embrace a moral responsibility to 'look out for others' weaves seamlessly through the school's curriculum. For example, children, because of the highly skilled modelling of adults, are practised at turn-taking, sharing and listening well to one another. Staff are highly observant and, as a result, are quick to offer guidance where needed, nipping in the bud any potential squabbles before they take hold. Despite the very young age of the children, the school day is filled with positivity and characterised by secure and cheerful relationships. One parent commented, 'I really like how they (the staff) help children to resolve any difficulties they have by supporting them to find solutions to problems.' I completely agree, as this approach was both highly evident and very effective throughout the inspection.

Children build trusting relationships with adults and their key workers, including those that take advantage of additional 'wraparound care' offered by the school. You are fastidious in your approach, insisting that there is continuity to staffing across the extended day. Responsibilities are carefully considered, such as ensuring that children who attend breakfast club and/or holiday-time care have the same key worker throughout the day and regardless of the time of year. The school takes excellent care of its children so that they are contented, secure and become inquisitive thinkers.

Children's understanding of how to stay safe is excellent. This is because adults' supervision is first rate and enhanced by the staff's careful attention to promoting children's acquisition of self-care strategies. For example, when undertaking outdoor activities, children were able to confidently identify that, when feeling chilly, they could go and fetch a pair of gloves, which they did independently of adult help. Equally, before having a snack, children were confidently able to wash and dry their hands, knowing that this is an important aspect of keeping yourself healthy.

Despite the closure of the children's centre, governors, leaders and staff have worked diligently to ensure that wider support, including for the most vulnerable, has continued to be a strength. Leaders make sure that help is made available, as appropriate, working well with a range of external agencies such as the educational psychology team. With a dent in funding in recent times, you have called upon the school's many supporters, including the recently formed 'friends' group, to also ensure that the site remains safe and well maintained. For example, the recent 'family dig day' to rejuvenate the school grounds was highly successful. One parent encapsulated the views of many stating, 'They (the staff) do an amazing job with the limited funds they have and a fantastic, inclusive community has been created around the school.'

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including: the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements; the effectiveness of teaching in promoting high achievement, including for children in receipt of the early years pupil premium funding, the quality of the school's curriculum, and the effectiveness of leaders and governors in driving improvement.
- Your leadership is of the highest calibre. You provide the utmost level of commitment to the children as well as being instrumental in the development and support of high quality early years education within Oxfordshire. The local authority rightly recognise that your school plays a significant role in championing the principles of high-quality early education. Recently forged partnerships, including with an early years centre in Sweden, are further extending the positive influence you exert.
- Your governors are equally passionate about the school and the community it serves. They provide a good level of support and challenge and have been instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of this nursery school within the local area. They take their responsibilities earnestly and are equally knowledgeable about what makes a first-class early years education. They play their part extremely well.
- The school is a leading light in the field of current early years research. Staff contribute well and are developing, securely, a whole host of suitable approaches to promote children's acquisition of early oracy skills, including for those children who speak English as an additional language. Staff are highly reflective and have the confidence to explore new ways of working and evaluate the difference these

make. A recent emphasis on exploring storytelling techniques, for example, is very successfully helping children develop their early skills of language and communication. One parent told me that their child did not speak a term ago and now is fully fluent. Parents sing the school's praises, recognising the rapid progress that their children make in developing a love of language from an early age.

- Disadvantaged children make the same excellent progress as their peers and achieve very well, routinely catching up quickly from lower starting points. Your indisputable belief that, 'All children, regardless of starting points, must cross the line together' shines through. Plans to help children overcome potential barriers to learning are detailed and of high quality. You and your staff are tenacious in reviewing the school's work and making adaptations if needed. No stone is left unturned and, as a result, the school's work in this aspect is superb. Proof, if it were needed, of the school's success is that all children, regardless of starting points, are able to start their Reception Year in their chosen primary school, with an equal chance of success.
- Children's independent skills are promoted extremely effectively. Both indoors and outdoors, activities are well organised and appealing. As a result, children are adept at making choices, such as during creative play, knowing exactly where to go and what to get. Staff are magnificent at hooking in to each child's interests, planning in the moment and taking a steer from children's experiences. Parents, too, are appreciative of the school's methodology, with one commenting, 'The nursery school is child-centred, and children are not forced into learning arbitrary things. Instead, the adults see what a child is interested in first, then run with that.'
- Parents speak highly of their child's continual development of self-confidence and independence. One parent noted, 'My child has already learned so much from being at nursery school, including being able to put on her coat and shoes by herself – which the staff taught her in her first week. She has also shown a keen interest in numbers which staff noticed, and then provided activities that would develop this further. She has also started to recognise letters and write her name.'
- Children's experiences and the school's curriculum are further enhanced by a multitude of external visitors. For example, the Chipping Norton librarian often visits the school, introducing families to a love of books. Consequently, many then sign up to the town's library and take the first steps on the journey to becoming lifelong readers. This is further supported by regular visits from parents and grandparents, who share stories with children during 'sofa superhero' time.
- Promoting children's expressive, creative and imaginative skills is a real strength. Staff are united in their belief that it is the process of being creative, rather than simply the final product, that is key to success. Children relish the opportunity to develop their own ideas through selecting and using different artistic materials and techniques. Children display competency when using a host of different materials and tools, such as using the glue gun competently.
- Storytelling opportunities are prevalent throughout the school day. Children are

encouraged to use their communication skills and recite their own imaginative stories to adults. During the inspection, two children gained much satisfaction from acting out their story and helping an adult to scribe. Children are encouraged to let their imagination run riot, such as when describing the main characters in their stories.

- The quality of teaching of early reading skills is excellent. Children quickly gain the skills needed, and some are working beyond age-related expectations. For example, some children can already confidently spell out simple words and recognise a host of initial sounds. Children's phonics skills of segmenting and blending are well honed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a clear line of sight on the national issue associated with excessive teacher workload is maintained so that effective solutions are fully explored.

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

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Farr
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and two governors, including the chair of the governing body. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. You and I observed the morning session together, which included a small teacher-led phonics lesson. I took account of seven free-text comments from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and spoke to parents as they arrived. I also took account of the views of one member of the school's team who responded to the online survey for staff. I analysed a range of the school's documentation, including information about children's achievement, the school improvement plan and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. We discussed your own evaluation of the school's effectiveness.