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Mrs Sarah Goldsmith
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Goldsmith

Short inspection of Downfield Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 15 January 2019, 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 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You and your staff have established a calm, happy and purposeful environment for pupils to learn in. As a result of effective leadership, the school has improved further since the previous inspection, when it was also judged to be good.

You and other leaders work effectively together with shared aims to ensure that pupils are well cared for and achieve as well as they can. This collaborative ethos extends beyond the school to the many external partners you work with. This includes the local authority and charities who bring further expertise, time and resources to help you in your ambitions to improve pupils' outcomes even further. For example, work with the local authority has helped you and other leaders to improve aspects of early years provision so that the proportion of pupils reaching a good level of development has increased. Charities have provided pupils who would not otherwise have access to high-quality reading opportunities with individual personal support and free books. As a result, more disadvantaged pupils than previously read regularly. In key stage 1, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in reading is increasing.

Leaders have reviewed the curriculum to ensure that it supports the specific context of the pupils and families that the school serves. This includes above-average numbers of pupils who speak English as an additional language, pupils in receipt of

the pupil premium and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

You use a wide range of emotional, social and behavioural support strategies. These effective interventions often utilise expertise from within school, including from the SEND pastoral team and leaders of the speech and language base. External agencies bring effective additional capacity and resources to support families. As a result of your drive to reach all pupils and their families, the strong relationships between members of the school – and the good teaching and the behaviour in lessons and around school – are often impressive. Learning is not disrupted and pupils who need specialist help receive it quickly. One parent commented, 'Downfield School is an exceptional school. My son never feels left out or different.' Another said, 'I cannot thank the school enough for the support that they have given me.'

Teaching is typically good and pupils respond well to their teachers. They benefit from a well-considered curriculum with a clear focus on high-quality reading. This helps pupils to develop a broad vocabulary and to understand more challenging texts. Pupils use the new words they come across in their writing, and this too is improving. Pupils listen carefully, engage in their work and are supported effectively by adults in the school.

Despite the school's good work and continued focus on identifying and filling gaps in pupils' learning – particularly in the basic skills of spelling and handwriting – there remains a continued challenge to ensure that some pupils in key stage 2 meet the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics. This is particularly true for boys. This was an area for improvement at the previous inspection and remains a priority for a small group of pupils.

Staff are keen to try new approaches to learning so that pupils can achieve the best that they can. Those who took part in Ofsted's online survey during the inspection – and those who spoke directly with me – feel that their professional development is a priority for leaders. They also feel that the school is aspirational for its pupils and that staff are trusted to try things out in ways that are right for them and the pupils.

The good practice that exists in the school is not always shared as quickly as it could be to ensure that as many pupils as possible benefit from the best teaching. For example, in some classes, resources and learning environments support pupils to understand expectations of spelling and handwriting. Pupils use these resources to form letters correctly and check words. This is not consistent across the school.

At the previous inspection in 2015, the attendance of pupils was identified as an area for improvement. You and governors have worked hard to drive up levels of attendance across the school. This includes a stronger focus on individual rewards and an increased awareness by families of the importance of good attendance.

While overall attendance was slightly below the national average in 2018, it has increased since the previous inspection and is currently improving strongly. There

has also been a reduction in the number of frequent non-attenders. Strategies that the school is using are having a positive impact. For example, parents and carers are now regularly alerted to drops in attendance and the consequent impact on learning. Pupils with the very best attendance receive special acknowledgement and rewards.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

You have created a positive culture of safeguarding in the school. The single central record indicates that all required checks are carried out to ensure that staff are suitable to work with pupils. Governors and external consultants check that aspects of the single central register and safer recruitment are correct and records are kept meticulously. Staff are well trained, including in the 'Prevent' duty. They are clear on how to report concerns about pupils and many explained in the discussions that I had with them how useful the regular staff updates and weekly discussions are. These meetings help staff understand aspects of safeguarding that they may have had little experience of. New staff feel that this has helped them to feel confident in dealing with safeguarding concerns.

Pupils say that they trust their teachers and feel safe at school. One pupil commented, 'I can trust my teachers. They look after me.' Pupils feel that they can ask for help if they need it. The curriculum supports pupils' awareness of staying safe online, and older pupils are clear and confident in knowing how to respond to inappropriate or bullying messages or communications.

Pupils say behaviour is good in school and the vast majority of pupils who responded to Ofsted's pupil survey say that adults in school deal with inappropriate behaviour swiftly. Parents agree. Almost all parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire – Parent View – said that their children are safe in school.

Inspection findings

- The school has a relatively high proportion of pupils whose first language is not English. It also has a greater-than-average proportion of disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. I wanted to find out how well leaders understand and support the needs of these significant groups of pupils.
- In 2018, the progress of Year 6 pupils with SEND, those in receipt of the pupil premium and those who speak English as an additional language was in line with – or above – other pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. This was an improvement on the previous year. Pupils in these groups currently in the school are also making strong progress because expert confident staff provide them with high levels of support. During lessons, teachers and other adults are effective in helping these pupils to achieve their best. Pupils receive personalised support in a range of ways, including from the on-site learning support base and from individualised online programmes.

- The attendance of pupils in these groups is also improving. This is because leaders have developed systems and processes which reward pupils who attend school regularly and they ensure that parents understand the link between regular attendance and good achievement.
- The proportion of children reaching a good level of development in the early years reached the national average for the first time in three years in 2018. The proportion of pupils who meet the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check has been in line with the national average for two years. However, fewer-than-average numbers of those who have not met this standard in Year 1 have gone on to do so in Year 2. I wanted to find out if the early years curriculum – including the teaching of phonics – helps children in the school now to achieve as well as they can.
- Teaching in pre-school and in Nursery gives children a good start to learning from typically low starting points. Pupils are well prepared for Reception, where they continue to make good progress in most areas of learning, including reading, writing and mathematics.
- Strong leadership in the early years is having a positive impact on securing parents' engagement in their children's learning. For example, by using digital as well as face-to-face communications, more parents find out what their children are learning. Parents attend well-planned workshops which show them how they can help their children at home.
- Teachers provide additional resources for children who need them in the early years. They ensure that pupils who do not read regularly have more opportunities to read and develop a love of reading and books. This focus on basic skills in the early years is helping more children to achieve a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year.
- Phonics is taught well and new approaches are contributing to higher attainment across the early years and in Year 1. Additional teachers provide regular tailored support for smaller groups so that teaching is matched to pupils' needs. However, the small number of pupils who do not meet the expected standard in phonics at the end of Year 1 are not provided with sufficient support to enable them to catch up quickly in Years 2 or 3. This affects their progress in reading, writing and spelling as they move through key stage 2.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the support for pupils who do not reach a good level of development in early years or the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check is more sharply focused as pupils move through the school
- teaching and support staff learn from each other through regular opportunities to share good practice.

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

Debbie Rogan
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I spoke with you, senior leaders and the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. I also spoke with pupils. I examined attendance information and policies and procedures for safeguarding pupils. I held discussions with leaders responsible for SEND provision, the use of pupil premium funding and the speech and language base. I conducted joint learning walks with you and other leaders and looked at a range of pupils' work from across the school.

The views of 129 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire – Parent View – were taken into account, as well as 89 responses which parents made using the free-text service. I held informal discussions with eight members of staff and took account of 49 responses to the staff survey. I also spoke with the school's improvement partner from the Hertfordshire local authority.