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26 June 2017

Mrs Sue Williams
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Williams

Short inspection of Stowford School

Following my visit to the school on 13 June 2017 with Matthew Shirley, 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 good in May 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your school is a vibrant place of learning. The quality of education pupils receive is effective in developing academic standards that are typically above the national average, alongside pupils' good personal development. Your conscientious approach since becoming headteacher in January 2017, allied with your steely determination to improve all aspects of the school further, is one of the key reasons why the school remains good. You have the highest respect from staff, parents and pupils, who recognise you as someone who will listen and resolve any concerns they may have promptly. As a result of your efforts, the progress for most pupils currently at the school is strong.

You have coped with the many changes to leadership at the school well and built an effective leadership team around you who share in your vision of what can be achieved. You communicate your vision of what you want Stowford School to provide for its pupils, families and community, well. Together, you invest in children's futures from the moment they start in Nursery and are successfully steering the school's course towards the highest standards of teaching and pupils' achievement. You use the recommendations from external reviews well, for example to re-organise leadership roles and responsibilities. Therefore all are clear in the part they play in driving improvements.

You recognise that securing further ongoing success requires a culture of continuous improvement from leaders, teachers and pupils. In striving to reach this

goal, you draw well on the expertise from the trust to help staff improve their practice and enable pupils to overcome any barriers to learning they may face. Improvements start with placing pupils' views and learning at the heart of your work and are evident through the effective actions of the school council. The school development plan provides a clear and accurate account of the school's strengths and weaknesses and states what needs to be done for further improvements to be achieved. This results in an honest and accurate self-evaluation by leaders and governors about what is working and what still needs to be done. For example, you are aware that monitoring by middle leaders, to inform actions within the plan, now needs to focus more precisely on the progress of key groups and their specific gains in knowledge, skill and understanding. Although this was an area for improvement identified at the previous inspection your current leadership team is entirely new. Therefore, to remain focused on this development is entirely appropriate. Other areas for improvement continue to be successfully tackled.

The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, are highly complimentary about you, your staff and all you do to make their children feel happy and well cared for. All parents feel that their children are safe in school. Parents typically commented on the welcoming ethos that helps children settle quickly, the stimulating curriculum and projects studied that engage and motivate their children by bringing learning to life. Pupils and parents are particularly enthused by the 'philosophy for children' activities that expose pupils to wider issues and spark debates about ideas or theories. Consequently pupils' ability to reason, infer and deduce ideas when thinking and communicating is developing strongly.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your leadership team have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You ensure that policies and practice keep abreast of recent legislation and good practice. Staff attend update training regularly so that they are vigilant and mindful of the potential dangers to pupils. All staff are aware of the procedures for passing on concerns. Monthly meetings with key members of staff and detailed, termly monitoring by governors of safeguarding matters keeps everyone up to date and informed of any issues. Your close links and proactive work with other professionals, such as social workers, ensure that referrals for more specialist support are managed well. Your strong commitment to pupils' safety is demonstrated in the way urgent matters were followed through by staff when they came to light during the inspection.

The governors responsible for safeguarding have had recent training that reflects the latest guidance. Termly checks by governors ensure that recruitment checks and records are kept in accordance with the government's guidance. Governors speak knowledgeably about how the school's ethos and curriculum fosters the sort of qualities and attitudes that pupils need to make the right decisions, to protect themselves from being drawn into things that are wrong and potentially harmful. Parents recognise pupils' positive qualities where respect and politeness are the norm.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection we explored how well disadvantaged pupils are achieving. We also looked at how well low-attaining pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, are performing. We examined how well the teaching of phonics and spelling was helping pupils to write accurately. Finally, we looked at why pupils' exclusions rates are higher than typically found.
- Your school development plan rightly identified closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers nationally as a key priority. Your revised strategy to meet the needs of this group of pupils is identifying their barriers to learning much more carefully than previously. Your chosen strategies, such as asking questions to disadvantaged pupils first, and prioritising their marking and feedback, are focusing teachers' attention much more closely on the performance and achievement of this group.
- You have used the detailed recommendations from an external evaluation of the use of pupil premium funding well to check whether your actions are working and to push forward with further developments. Your vision of what you want effective provision for these pupils to be is now an embedded part of routine classroom practice. Regular tracking and reviews of the effectiveness of your strategy at pupil progress meetings keep you fully informed of pupils' progress and performance. As a result of your increased urgency and focus, the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils is improving rapidly, and in some year groups the attainment gap has been fully eradicated.
- You also identify low-attaining pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities as key groups who could be doing even better. Your new special educational needs coordinator has a clear set of actions being systematically addressed, such as reviewing and updating the school special educational needs policy. Careful analysis of pupils' needs is being used to deliver effective and costed interventions that contain clear success criteria and targets for pupils' progress. Adults use their deep knowledge of pupils well to provide a judicious blend of academic rigour and personal support for some individuals.
- You are aware that greater precision is now needed in day-to-day teaching to ensure that the needs of lower-attaining pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are fully met. Occasionally adults do not use responses from these pupils carefully enough, or other assessment information about pupils' knowledge, skills or understanding, to match activities that meet their needs well and ensure they can progress well. Consequently the progress of these groups is not as rapid as that of other pupils at the school.
- Pupils are very positive about writing and enjoy writing across a wide range of genres and topics they study. Increasingly pupils are becoming more adept at reflecting on their writing successes and identifying their own next steps in development. They understand the strategies they can use if they get stuck and what to do to help them progress. Consequently pupils' progress in their knowledge and understanding of text purpose, structure and organisation is good. Their attainment in writing is above standards expected nationally.

- When we looked at a range of pupils' book together, you and your middle leaders were quick to identify that pupils are not routinely using their knowledge of phonics or spelling strategies to spell accurately in their writing. Over time pupils' outcomes in the Year 1 phonics check have been above average. However, pupils' performance in spelling, punctuation and grammar has been below other subjects by the time they reach Year 6. Pupils' spelling mistakes are not always identified and addressed quickly enough. Therefore the same mistakes are repeated. The quality of pupils' handwriting and presentation leads to some confusion when spelling more complex words in key stage 2. Pupils' progress and ability to spell more complex words or use technical aspects of punctuation and grammar correctly is not as strong as other aspects of their writing.
- Together we examined case studies into exclusions that have occurred at the school. It was clear to me that from the information we explored, the school did everything possible to mitigate against taking the step of exclusion and to meet the unique needs of individual pupils. Despite your best efforts, it was deemed necessary as all other avenues had been exhausted. Current rates of exclusion are below the national average.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils use their knowledge of phonics and spelling strategies to spell words accurately when writing
- the quality of pupils' handwriting and presentation improves
- activities planned meet the needs of lower-attaining pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities so that their progress improves
- monitoring by middle leaders places a greater emphasis on pupils' gains in knowledge, skills and understanding and the findings are used to bring about precise improvements.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Light
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, your deputy headteacher, the leaders for the early years and key stage 1, and for special educational needs. Three members of the governing body, including the chair, met the inspector to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The views of a number of

parents were gathered through their responses to Parent View. Visits to classrooms were conducted jointly with you to evaluate the impact of teaching on pupils' learning, to review the quality of pupils' work over time, and to talk informally with them about their experiences of school. A range of documentary evidence was evaluated, including documents relating to safeguarding and governance. Inspectors met with a group of pupils from key stage 2.