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Mrs Naomi Pauley
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Dear Mrs Pauley

Short inspection of Vallis First School

Following my visit to the school on 11 April 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 good in September 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following disappointing outcomes in 2016, you have been effective in targeting the right priorities with rigour and purpose. This has brought about the desired impact for pupils. You work particularly well with other leaders, including the assistant headteacher, middle leaders and governors. These all play a significant role in planning, implementing and evaluating the school development plan (SDP). You ensure that leaders feel valued and empowered to make meaningful contributions towards school improvement. As a result, staff and pupil morale is high. You place pupils at the heart of decision-making. This is recognised by parents and carers, who are overwhelmingly positive about the school. For example, they made comments on Parent View such as, 'I feel that every teacher and member of staff truly cares about my children, their well-being and their education.'

You use a range of effective strategies to ensure that work is well matched to pupils' different needs. You hold challenging meetings with teachers to identify pupils who need additional support to catch up. These lead to high-quality individualised interventions which target weaknesses in pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding. As a result, pupils make strong progress in reading, writing and mathematics. This approach also benefits those pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Leaders and teachers ensure that good provision, including the use of a small nurture group, meets pupils' social, emotional and academic needs. This is valued by pupils and parents. For example, parents stated

on free-text, 'Since our daughter has been put on the SEN register ... her work and confidence have improved markedly.'

You are proactive in tackling weaknesses, including the areas for improvement raised at the last inspection. In particular, the focus on raising standards in writing and mathematics for prior middle-attaining pupils is leading to a greater proportion meeting the national standards. This includes in assessments at the end of key stage 1. Furthermore, your evaluation of phonics teaching led to an overhaul of how you group pupils to teach phonics. This has enabled better support for pupils in using their phonics knowledge and understanding for reading and writing.

You, and other leaders, fully recognise that there is room for further improvement. In particular, you rightly target raising achievement for disadvantaged pupils. Work in books and the school's own assessment information show that there are still some differences for pupils which need to be diminished rapidly. This includes increasing the proportion of disadvantaged pupils reaching the highest standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Furthermore, we found a limited quantity and quality of extended writing in pupils' workbooks. This, along with poor handwriting and presentation for some pupils, reduces the standard of writing overall. It also restricts the ability of a few to express themselves fluently as authors in different situations and contexts.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and all leaders, including governors, are diligent and thorough in discharging your safeguarding duties. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Governors are proactive in checking and evaluating safeguarding processes, systems and policies. You ensure that training for staff is timely and meets statutory requirements. As a result, you have effective and stringent measures in place to keep pupils safe. Staff are knowledgeable and demonstrate a keen sense of awareness to observe, record and communicate concerns to designated leaders quickly. In addition, you are tenacious and rigorous in challenging other professional agencies. You frequently hold them to account for their decisions and engage purposefully with them in 'going the extra mile' to keep pupils safe.

Pupils report that they feel safe. They know how to look after themselves in a range of different situations, for example when working online. Pupils say that this is a happy school, where pupils are well behaved. They are aware of the different forms of bullying and say that they are rare. However, if bullying does happen, pupils trust staff and feel that it is dealt with quickly. Safeguarding is regarded as 'everyone's responsibility', which is reflected in the culture and ethos of the running of the school.

Inspection findings

- The first key line of enquiry focused on how well leaders are raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. You have robust systems and processes for

identifying pupils who are falling behind. You know the journey of each disadvantaged pupil and use this to provide ongoing and often individualised support. Teachers' plans and actions take account of pupils' progress to ensure that support is well targeted to meet pupils' needs. As a result, disadvantaged pupils are being helped to overcome barriers and to make strong progress, often from low starting points.

- Case studies and a range of other evidence provide robust accounts of the high-quality care and nurture provided to ensure that disadvantaged pupils are supported emotionally and socially. Specialist staff, including those with pastoral responsibilities, work well to help pupils settle to make strides in their academic progress.
- Overall, there are still too few disadvantaged pupils consistently meeting, or exceeding, national expectations in reading, writing and mathematics. Your strategy for raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is fit for purpose. However, plans sometimes lack precision in terms of clear success criteria and timings related to pupils' outcomes. This prevents leaders, including governors, from intervening sooner to boost the achievement of key groups and cohorts.
- My second line of enquiry evaluated the impact of actions to improve outcomes for prior middle-attaining pupils. Information from the key stage 1 tests and assessments in 2017 show that middle-attaining pupils are making strong progress towards national expectations. More pupils attained the highest standards, especially in reading. This is due to your high expectations and checks on pupils' progress. One notable strength is the extent to which pupils are involved in evaluating their own learning. This enables them to take greater responsibility for correcting and improving their own work and in developing good habits and attitudes to learning.
- You have targeted training and development for staff in the right areas to improve pupils' outcomes. In particular the school's new agreed calculations policy is helping to improve pupils' fluency in mathematics. Similarly, writing is being developed through your work with Frome Learning Partnership (FLP), focusing on mastery and providing pupils with an approach to deepen their skills. Pupils are gaining confidence in writing, and their use of grammar is often a strength.
- We noted, however, that there are some areas which are slowing pupils' progress, often towards the highest standards in writing. Pupils are not always being provided with enough high-quality opportunities to write at length in order to apply and deepen their writing skills. Inconsistent and poor handwriting prevents pupils from writing with fluency, speed and legibility. Weaknesses in spelling for some pupils in Years 3 and 4 detract from the overall standards and quality of writing seen in pupils' workbooks.
- Teachers check pupils' phonic knowledge and understanding regularly against age-appropriate expectations. Their assessments are accurate and used to plan appropriate next steps, including interventions for pupils who need them. Teaching assistants also play a crucial role in teaching and assessing pupils. You have responded to specific advice from literacy consultants about how to organise and manage pupil groups effectively, especially to meet the different abilities within phonics sessions. This has been pivotal in raising standards,

because teaching is now carefully matched to the individual needs of the pupils on a daily basis. For example, children who started school with no prior knowledge of letters and sounds are being taught well to start catching up from the earliest opportunity.

- The final key line of enquiry evaluated the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding culture and procedures. Part of this focused on the impact of leaders' actions and strategies to improve pupils' attendance. You are proactive and determined to tackle poor attendance, especially for those pupils who have persistently high absence. Your strategies involve a range of staff and services to communicate with parents and hold them to account. This is starting to see attendance improving towards the national average. However, you and other leaders recognise that attendance continues to be a key challenge for safeguarding reasons and to raise the achievement of key groups, especially disadvantaged pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they continue to:

- raise attainment of disadvantaged pupils, including those capable of reaching the highest standards
- improve the quantity and quality of pupils' extended writing, including through insisting on legible, fluent and correctly formed letters in handwriting.

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

Yours sincerely

Stewart Gale
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

We agreed the timetable and activities for the inspection. I worked extensively with you and your assistant headteacher, including sampling a range of pupils' work and talking with pupils through inspection activities. I scrutinised safeguarding records and we discussed a wide range of related matters, including staff recruitment, training and vetting arrangements. I spoke with pupils and staff about their views of safeguarding. I evaluated evidence that shows how you work with other agencies to keep children safe. I worked extensively across the various age ranges in the school, including in the early years. I met with representatives of the governing body and reviewed school documents, including the school's self-evaluation summary, SDP and records of governors' visits. I took full account of the 39 responses on Parent View as well as the free-texts and letters received through the inspection.