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Mrs Gail Beaton
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Dear Mrs Beaton

Short inspection of Acorns Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 November 2017 with Ann Gill, 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have ensured that a commitment to providing pupils with a happy, safe and caring environment underpins all that the school does. Your high expectations are epitomised in the breadth and balance of the curriculum, which supports all pupils to work towards the fulfilment of their potential. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the work of the school. One parent summed up the views of many when they described how the school had given their child 'a new lease of life' and that their child 'loves coming to school, which caters well for all his needs.' These sentiments were echoed by other parents, one of whom commented that their child 'even asks if he can go to school on weekends and in half-term'.

You have ensured that pupils' happiness and welfare remains at the heart of the school's work. Pupils are complimentary about the school. They say that behaviour is good, bullying is very rare and that staff play an important role in helping them to do their best. These sentiments reflect the warm and supportive relationships between pupils and staff that we observed during the inspection. Members of staff thoroughly enjoy working at the school. They work effectively as a cohesive team, and they take great delight in supporting pupils to make small but important steps in their learning.

You became headteacher in January 2015, after working at the school since 2009. During your time as headteacher, you have built upon many of the school's

established strengths, while making a concerted effort to further increase expectations of the amount of academic progress that pupils are capable of making. You have constructed a new and highly skilled senior leadership team. Senior leaders are adept at evaluating the quality of teaching, and they do so with balance and perception. Leadership of the early years is also a real strength. You have also undertaken a great deal of work to strengthen middle leadership. Subject coordinators now play a key role in driving improvements to the curriculum in their areas, and they are increasingly involved in monitoring and evaluating pupils' progress.

You have adapted capably to the increasingly complex and demanding needs of pupils. In particular, you have enhanced provision considerably to support pupils who speak English as an additional language, and pupils who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). You have also greatly increased the scope of your work with other schools. You have introduced an outreach service, and have supported over 10 mainstream primary schools with different areas of their work, such as behaviour management and the deployment of teaching assistants. You also play an active role within the North West Special School Assessment Group, which is undertaking some innovative and pioneering work to develop common aspects of assessment across different special schools.

You have emphatically addressed the areas for improvement that were identified during the previous inspection. You have ensured that pupils who have visual impairments always have access to specialist learning resources. You work closely with a teacher who specialises in supporting pupils who have visual impairments, and she has delivered training that has increased staff awareness of how to support these pupils most effectively. You have also introduced a number of measures to improve the ways in which the learning of pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties is assessed. This, in turn, has enabled your staff to plan more precisely what these pupils need to achieve next in their learning. As a result of this work, the amount of progress made by pupils who have visual impairments and/or profound and multiple learning difficulties has improved significantly and their progress is now in line with other pupils at the school.

In response to the previous inspection report, you have made several improvements to the outdoors provision in the early years. For example, there is now a covered canopy, and outside water and role play areas. You have also introduced a multi-surface for bikes and other equipment. You have identified that pupils now spend far more time outside, and that pupils are enthusiastic and animated when learning outdoors. This is consistent with your belief that 'there is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes!' These enhancements have contributed to the quicker progress that children are now making in the early years.

Finally, you have improved the clarity with which you track pupils' progress. Where appropriate, you measure pupils' progress against the progress of pupils with similar starting points. In turn, this has helped you to improve the clarity of information that governors receive about pupil progress. The governors, under the leadership of a relatively new chair of governors, are becoming more adept at challenging you

and your leaders over the amount of progress made by pupils, and this has contributed to the significantly quicker progress made by pupils over the last two years.

Despite driving significant improvements across the school, you are reflective and keen to improve further. You have recognised that the school's improvement plan is narrow in scope and does not contain measurable targets that would enable leaders and governors to evaluate the progress that is being made more accurately. As a result, the improvement plan does not reflect the ambition and clarity of vision that you have for taking the school forward. You also acknowledge that, while a great deal of work has been undertaken to increase the expectations of staff, expectations of what pupils can achieve academically are sometimes not high enough. In particular, you are keen for staff to have the very highest expectations of what the most able pupils can achieve.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have established a culture in which all members of staff take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. Members of staff demonstrate a clear understanding of the safeguarding issues that are more likely to be prevalent among pupils who have particular special educational needs and/or disabilities. Your staff know the pupils exceptionally well and are extremely vigilant to any changes in their mood or presentation. They record and communicate any concerns in a timely manner using the school's system.

You and other leaders have ensured that all safeguarding records are detailed and of high quality. You closely monitor the well-being of pupils who are vulnerable and your work with parents is exemplary. The work of your 'parents group' acts as a focal point for your work on parental engagement, and you work in conjunction with child and adolescent mental health services to offer parents the opportunity to access further support on how they can best ensure the well-being of their children.

You enjoy productive working relationships with a range of partners, including physiotherapists and occupational health. You make referrals to external agencies as appropriate, and you have demonstrated tenacity to make sure that pupils access the support necessary to ensure that they are safe and well looked after.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these was to look at how effectively teaching is enabling pupils, particularly the most able, to make rapid progress from their different starting points. You presented data that indicates that pupils have made far quicker progress over the last two years. Observations of teaching indicated that teachers and teaching assistants provide effective individual support to pupils, which helps them to overcome their personal barriers to learning. We saw some excellent examples of questioning, which helped teachers to assess carefully what pupils know and can do.
- You described how you have developed the way that pupils are grouped. Pupils

now learn alongside others who have similar prior attainment and/or learning needs when they are taught English and mathematics. This has been instrumental in helping teachers to provide pupils with work that is better suited to their aptitudes and abilities. You also feel it has made an important contribution to the quicker progress made by pupils over the last two years. Despite this, you are keen to ensure that staff have even higher expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving academically. In particular, you recognise that more can be done to challenge the most able pupils.

- A second key line of enquiry focused on how effectively the curriculum provides individual pupils with the breadth of experience to enjoy happy and productive lives after the Acorns. You passionately articulated a clear rationale for the design and implementation of the curriculum. You have maintained a consistent focus on ensuring that pupils benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum, that is complemented by high-quality opportunities for enrichment and a 'wider curriculum' that supports pupils to overcome their personal barriers to achievement. You understand the fundamental importance of English, mathematics and communication to unlocking other areas of the curriculum. Consequently, you have ensured that a diligent focus is maintained on helping pupils to acquire basic numeracy, literacy and communication skills. Great significance is also attached to learning in subjects beyond English and mathematics. These subjects are taught discretely and engage pupils in content that is carefully linked to the national curriculum.
- The 'wider curriculum' is carefully matched to pupils' individual needs. For example, some pupils benefit from a sensory education, whereas others have hydrotherapy sessions within their personal timetable. Pupils also benefit from different aesthetic and creative experiences, such as visits from different performers and musicians. You have also ensured that a focus on 'life skills' helps to promote pupils' independence. For example, pupils are supported to use public transport and go shopping at the local supermarket. As a result of the breadth and personalisation of the curriculum, pupils are well prepared for life after the Acorns.
- Finally, we looked at how effectively pupils are supported to attend school regularly. You showed us attendance data that highlighted a significant improvement in attendance for the previous academic year. This indicates that the lower attendance from the 2015/16 academic year was an anomaly. Consequently, school attendance is once again above the national average for special schools, despite a significant number of pupils having complex medical needs. Leaders outlined a number of thorough procedures for ensuring that pupils attend school regularly. Ultimately, however, pupils are keen to attend because they enjoy school and greatly value the positive relationships they have established with their peers and adults.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school improvement plan is broad in scope and contains measurable targets

- teachers and other adults have even higher academic expectations of what pupils, particularly the most able, can achieve.

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

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you and your deputy headteacher. We also met with members of the governing body. We met with the school's improvement partner. We met formally with a group of pupils and talked informally with others around the school. We met formally with a group of staff, which included teachers and teaching assistants.

Leaders accompanied us on visits to all classes, where we observed teaching and learning in a range of subjects. We worked with the deputy headteacher to look at work produced by pupils throughout the school and across the curriculum.

We examined a range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding. We also scrutinised a range of policies, the school improvement plan and self-evaluation report. Inspectors also looked at the school's website.

As part of the inspection, we considered 18 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. There were no responses to the pupil survey. We considered 20 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. An inspector spoke to parents at the start of the day, and 20 comments received by Ofsted's free-text facility were also considered.