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20 November 2017

Mr Ian Wellens
Bleak Hill Primary School
Hamilton Road
Windle
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WA10 6HG

Dear Mr Wellens

No formal designation inspection of Bleak Hill Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 8 November 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about outcomes for pupils at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements and met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, parents, the chair of the governing body and a representative of the local authority.

The inspector carried out joint learning walks, observed teaching and learning, spoke with pupils and looked at the work in some pupils' books. The inspector also looked at a range of documents, including those relating to attendance, self-evaluation and development planning.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school continues to be outstanding and that safeguarding is effective.

Context

Bleak Hill is a larger-than-average-sized primary school. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and that of pupils who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language are much lower than average. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils supported by the pupil premium funding is lower than average. The proportion of pupils who have support for special educational needs and/or disabilities is around the national average. The proportion of pupils supported with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan is below the national average.

The inspection took place due to concerns around a decline in standards at key stage 2 in 2016. Following several years of attainment and progress that was significantly above national averages, there was a dip in writing outcomes in key stage 2 in 2016. This adversely affected the combined reading, writing and mathematics scores. This dip came about because leaders and teachers gave insufficient attention to the gathering of evidence of pupils' writing in Year 6. As a result, leaders were not able to provide enough evidence to support their judgements of pupils' attainment in writing. Leaders dealt swiftly and effectively with this dip. Provisional data for 2017, which was moderated by the local authority, shows that pupils' attainment in writing at the expected and higher standards is once again well above national averages. However, progress for these pupils is average due to their exceptionally high starting points. Leaders have ensured that teachers understand leaders' expectations to check and monitor pupils' progress in writing. Teachers in all year groups now use these checks highly effectively to plan for pupils' next steps in learning. Leaders have also ensured that the teaching of writing has a clear sequence that is consistent across school. Pupils value this structure and talk about how this helps them to improve. Teachers' focus on higher standards is paying dividends. Many middle-ability pupils are beginning to write at higher standards, demonstrating exceptional progress. Pupils' use of grammar, punctuation and spelling is particularly effective. As a result, the most able pupils in Years 5 and 6 write with flair. For example, one pupil wrote, 'Steadily, it drifted, creating a pathway of hope between the tumbling breakers'. Work in books shows that current pupils make substantial progress in writing across most year groups.

Leaders had anticipated the dip in reading at key stage 2 in 2017. Although pupils' attainment was in line with national averages, their progress was not good. Pupils made less than expected progress. Teachers had already begun work to strengthen pupils' stamina for reading and to develop pupils' deeper understanding of what they read. This work has had a significant impact on current pupils. Currently, pupils in key stage 2 make outstanding progress in reading from their different starting points. Pupils read fluently and with expression. They say they enjoy reading and have a variety of favourite authors. Adults closely monitor pupils' independent reading and pupils choose challenging books from the wide variety on offer. Pupils say they read extensively in other areas of the curriculum. Pupils' high rate of progress is because of adults' clear and focused teaching of reading.

Teachers ensure that they plan reading lessons carefully, taking into account the needs of the pupils. Before a lesson, teachers plan questions about reading thoroughly to ensure that no time is wasted. Adults demonstrate exceptional subject knowledge in reading and use excellent questioning to develop pupils' understanding further.

Children enter the school with skills and abilities that are broadly typical. Some start school with skills and abilities above this. Leaders accurately identify children's baseline in consultation with feeder nurseries and parents. Children typically make outstanding progress in the early years and a much higher proportion of children achieve a good level of development or exceed this than the national average at the end of the Reception Year. There was a slight dip in 2016, which was specific to the children in that year. Despite this, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development was still above the national average.

This slight dip was reversed in 2017 and provisional data shows that a very high proportion of children reached typical standards, with a significant proportion above this. There is no difference in outcomes for boys and girls.

Children currently in the Reception classes receive outstanding teaching that enables them to make excellent progress. Leaders continually develop the early years provision so that it is exciting and stimulating. Teachers and other adults check and monitor children's progress carefully and plan activities which take account of what children know and can do. Adults develop children's independence exceptionally well. For example, the mathematics and writing huts in the outdoor provision allow children to select materials to help them with their work and play. Adults support children's independent choice of materials to develop children's knowledge and understanding through highly effective questioning.

Teachers in key stage 1 build upon the outstanding progress that children make in the early years. Current pupils in key stage 1 make outstanding progress from their different starting points. Consequently, a much higher proportion than nationally reach the expected and higher standards in key stage 1 in reading, writing and mathematics. Progress in writing is exceptional. There is no difference in the attainment of boys and girls. A much higher proportion of pupils than seen nationally reach the expected standard in the phonics check at the end of Year 1.

The carefully planned and ambitious curriculum is strong. Teachers provide an extensive range of experiences that enable pupils to broaden their understanding in a wide range of contexts. For example, the work pupils produced during the recent art week was of a very high quality. Through the very-well-planned curriculum, leaders have ensured that pupils know how to stay safe, including when out in the community and when online. Teachers provide pupils with opportunities to study a wide range of different world cultures and religions. Consequently, pupils experience a rich and vibrant curriculum and adults prepare pupils well for life in modern Britain.

Teaching is consistently highly effective for all groups of pupils in key stages 1 and 2, including for disadvantaged pupils. Adults work extremely well together and this teamwork is seamless in lessons. Teachers and other adults have high expectations. They want pupils to do well and consequently plan and deliver lessons that stretch and challenge all, including the most able. As a result, the majority of pupils make outstanding progress. Where this is not the case, for example for middle-attaining pupils in mathematics, leaders are aware of this and plans are in place to improve this aspect.

Behaviour in lessons, at playtime and lunchtime is exemplary, and reflects the school's effective and consistent strategies. Pupils' very positive attitudes to learning lead to a focused, calm environment, which in turn has a positive impact on their outcomes. Pupils are very polite and well mannered. They support each other exceptionally well in lessons and during the wider school day.

Leaders welcomed the inspection as a way to further their development. The senior leadership team work very well together and have a blend of skills that complement each other. Leaders are highly reflective and analyse their own performance. They constantly strive to do even better. As a teaching school, leaders ensure that the pupils in school come first. They are not afraid to have challenging conversations and to take difficult decisions for the good of the pupils.

Leaders are not complacent and recognise that there is always more to do. They recognise that in order for pupils in key stage 2 to make consistently good and outstanding progress in mathematics, adults could do more for middle-attaining pupils to help them to reach the higher standards. These pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to talk about their mathematical thinking or investigate numbers in all classes. However, there are pockets of excellent practice within the school that leaders can build on.

Governors are knowledgeable and committed to improving the school. They have a detailed understanding of the school's priorities and challenge leaders to ensure that pupils get the best education possible. Governors have a blend of skills that they use to good effect.

Governors have ensured that leaders spend the pupil premium funding judiciously to benefit disadvantaged pupils. Consequently, through additional support from highly skilled teachers and other adults, these pupils make the same outstanding rates of progress as other pupils in school. Their attainment is above that of other pupils nationally. Governors have ensured that the primary school sports funding is used well. A specialist provider contributes to the very good progress seen in physical education and sport. Teachers use this expertise to develop their own teaching further.

The governing body ensures that the school meets all its statutory requirements for safeguarding. This includes the robust checking of the suitability of adults to work with children. Suitable checks are made on visitors to the school. Leaders take an active approach to keeping children safe. They know the families and the community well. Leaders are very aware of the specific issues relating to the school. Leaders record and manage any concerns, which leaders track through to a satisfactory conclusion.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that a greater proportion of middle-attaining pupils reach the higher standards in mathematics, by:
 - ensuring that teachers embed a deepening of understanding within a lesson so that pupils are using their basic skills
 - allowing pupils to explain their mathematical thinking
 - giving opportunities to investigate and play with numbers.

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

Yours sincerely

Tanya Hughes
Her Majesty's Inspector