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26 February 2018

Mrs Clare Talbot
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Dear Mrs Talbot

Short inspection of Gaddesden Row JMI School

Following my visit to the school on 6 February 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be good.

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

There have been considerable changes to the staffing and membership of the governing body since 2014. Of the current staff, 70%, including you, were not at the school at the time of the last inspection. You took up your position in September 2017, joining the assistant headteacher, who was appointed to that new role in September 2016. From 2015, the school numbers dropped considerably, at one point being as low as 37. You and your governors are pleased that this decline has been stemmed and the school roll, while not at capacity, is increasing. You and your staff have had to be very flexible about how classes are grouped together in response to the challenge of changing numbers. The early years has had four different teachers in recent years. Recognising how difficult it is to recruit teachers in this area, it is to your credit that you have recently managed to secure an experienced, permanent member of staff to take on this area. The chair of governors has recently changed and several other governors were not present at the last inspection. Despite this, leaders have worked hard to recruit new governors to ensure that the governing body is at its full complement.

The school is a vibrant, inviting place, where staff feel valued and pupils flourish. All your staff are proud to work at the school and virtually all say that the school is well led and managed. Pupils love coming to their 'amazing, brilliant' school and particularly like the small classes. 'That means that everyone gets a chance to say what they think and to learn what they need to learn,' said one pupil. Responsibility

is a core value you foster in pupils at Gaddesden Row. They say they enjoy the extra responsibilities they have as school councillors or team captains. It is clear that the core values permeate all that you and your staff do. Another of your core values is aspiration. Pupils clearly have high aspirations. They said, 'We can be anything we want to if we put our minds to it.' For example, some told me they want to be vets, teachers or mechanics.

Parents and carers overwhelmingly support the school and your leadership. It is again to you and your staff's credit that 100% of parents who responded to the online survey would recommend this school to others. They say that their children are happy, well cared for and make good progress. Texts received from parents were many and included: 'This is the perfect nurturing environment for my children to flourish in and reach their potential'; 'A jewel of a school'; 'I feel incredibly lucky to have such a resource on our doorstep.' You have done much in the short time since your arrival to continue to build parents' confidence in the school. Parents appreciate this too, one commenting, 'The headteacher is a great balance of professional and approachable, and is always on the playground available to talk.'

At your last inspection, leaders were asked to improve the quality of teaching particularly for most-able pupils, and to ensure that teachers provide guidance for all pupils to make good progress in mathematics. You and your predecessors have continued to develop both areas. You have ensured that staff understand the high expectations you have of them. In so doing, you have revisited how teachers plan the curriculum to best suit the needs of each year group within each class. Changes in the number of children and pupils in year groups has meant that you had to rearrange class groupings ready for September 2017. For example, two classes now have children or pupils from different key stages. Although this has been challenging, your staff have risen to it. As a result, expectations for each year group are becoming increasingly clear to both staff and pupils. Teachers are helping pupils to understand what they need to learn next, correct their mistakes and how to improve their work. Pupils value this support, one saying, 'It doesn't matter if you make a mistake. There is always a way to fix it.' Work to improve the quality of teaching has undoubtedly provided a strong base from which the school can continue to grow. However, you accept that there is evidence to suggest that there is still some work to do to ensure that most-able pupils achieve as well as they can.

You and your assistant headteacher, who also leads the development of mathematics, are supporting staff with implementing a new 'creative curriculum'. It is evident from the beautiful work on the walls, pupils' work in their books, and the learning seen during the inspection that this is taking shape. Pupils took part in the whole school theme to celebrate Shrove Tuesday. They excitedly tasted fruits, selected their preferred toppings and ate pancakes they had made. From the very youngest children to the oldest pupils, they were delighted with their day. Teachers thought carefully about how they could include English, mathematics and science. For example, Italy class used all of their senses to try different fruits and talked about which they preferred, recording their findings. One pupil, who was eager to try fruits he had not previously eaten, said, 'I really love these cherries. They are so sweet.' Pupils made tally charts recording the pancake topping choices their

classmates had made, while in Australia class, pupils designed posters to help them find Mr Wolf, having read 'Mr Wolf's Pancakes'. Pupils clearly enjoyed their cross-curricular work and doubtless will remember this day for some time to come. However, it is evident in pupils' work books that teachers do not provide enough opportunities for pupils to write at length and apply their basic mathematics and English skills more regularly across the curriculum.

Safeguarding is effective.

Keeping children safe permeates all that the school does. Leaders and governors take their safeguarding role seriously. They regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their safeguarding and child-protection procedures, highlighting any arising concerns. For example, following an audit of the early years environment, governors are funding improvements to the outdoor space. While the area is not considered to be unsafe, you have highlighted that it does not meet the needs of children as well as it might.

You and your staff know your responsibilities well. You follow up any concerns you have in a timely manner, liaising effectively with external agencies when necessary, for example with the Traveller service, attendance officer and social services. As a result, pupils and families receive good support. However, despite your best efforts to ensure that parents understand the importance of regular, punctual attendance, too many pupils are absent from school. You and your governors have taken an appropriately robust stance about parents taking their children on holiday in term time. Despite this, some parents still insist on doing so. As a result, absence and persistent absence figures are well above the national average. You are determined to continue to make the improvement that you have seen already with some pupils' attendance since September.

Pupils said they feel safe, know who to go to if they have a concern, and how to keep themselves safe when using the computer. They know that bullying is 'one step up from teasing and is constant', and that it rarely occurs at Gaddesden Row. Pupils told me that behaviour is largely good, which was confirmed during my visit, and that they know and regularly apply the school's 'golden rules'.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I explored several key lines of enquiry discussed at the first meeting with you. We also added a further line of enquiry as a result of that initial discussion.
- My first line of enquiry related to how well curriculum planning ensures that pupils are working at age-related expectations. This is because children and pupils are necessarily taught in mixed-age classes, some now in classes that bridge two key stages.
- You have introduced a new 'creative curriculum' to support teachers in the development of pupils' skills across all subjects. Although this is only recent, it is clear from work in pupils' books that teachers are beginning to include more cross-curricular work. For example, while learning about Buddhism in religious

education, pupils developed their techniques in art and explored the history of this religion.

- Most teachers ensure that pupils know what they should be achieving for their age. Teachers make explicit the 'levels' of learning that pupils should be aiming towards dependent on the year group they are in. Adults know the pupils in their classes very well and adapt the learning to their needs. When speaking with pupils, especially the older pupils in the school, they are very clear that this is only a guide for them. However, it is not a 'ceiling' on their work. For example, some Year 4 pupils were working on Year 5 objectives, while sometimes it was more appropriate for a Year 5 pupil to begin with work on Year 4 until he felt confident to move on.
- It was evident when visiting classes that pupils are given the opportunity to discuss their learning with their classmates. Where pupils are used to this practice, it developed their thinking and helped them to explain what they were learning. This was particularly so in English. For example, pupils could explain what language was best suited when designing an effective poster.
- In some year groups, pupils are given opportunities to explore their thinking and deepen their learning in mathematics. This is more developed further up the school but not exclusively so. For example, pupils could explain to each other why tally charts are useful and how this is an effective way to instantly show the popularity of pupils' choices. However, most-able pupils said that their work was too easy. They also said that they would like more opportunities to do problem solving and to apply their skills to real-life situations.
- My second line of enquiry related to how well teaching enables most-able pupils to achieve as well as they can. This is because only a small proportion of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, at the end of key stages 1 and 2 reached the higher standard in 2016 and 2017.
- Since your arrival in September 2017, you have taken steps to ensure that most-able pupils are identified from their attainment at the end of the previous key stage. Because the school has spaces in some year groups, a number of pupils join Gaddesden Row at times other than at the beginning of either a key stage or academic year. Although this is a challenge in terms of ensuring that their progress continues, you track these pupils carefully to identify if they are at risk of not achieving as well as they can, and put in timely support to good effect.
- You have introduced more regular assessment points throughout the school year and ensured, through moderation with other local schools, that your teachers make accurate assessments of pupils' achievement. It is evident from work in pupils' books, when speaking with pupils and from the school's own assessment information that some pupils are not yet on track to achieve the higher standard that their previous key stage indicated they were capable of. Through regular meetings with teachers, you have highlighted those pupils who are at risk of not achieving as well as they can. Some are now only one step away from being on track to do so.
- The introduction of writing folders, and the evidence that is within them since September, emphasises your concern that there are not enough opportunities for pupils to write at length. You and your assistant headteacher, who also teaches

Years 4, 5 and 6, recognise that this is a potential barrier to pupils achieving the higher standard. Building their resilience, raising their expectations of what they are capable of, and ensuring that they have regular extended writing sessions are priorities you have highlighted in your school development plan.

- We saw examples, however, of some very effective writing that has clearly been drawn from pupils' reading experience. For example, following work on space, one most-able pupil wrote, 'I started to wonder who was painting the night sky and who was the person beaming the light, putting its big cage across the other side of the world.' While doing some work on effectively describing a setting for a story, another pupil wrote, 'It was time for bed. I jumped on the rags and tried to fall asleep over the kids' screams of pain.'
- The third line of enquiry related to how well children in the Reception class are prepared for Year 1. This was because you wanted to further explore the work that has already been done in this year group as well as highlight areas for development.
- The number of children who come to Gaddesden Row at the start of the Reception Year varies from year to year. For example, last year, there were eight children and this year, there are only three. It is always going to be the case, therefore, that this year group combines with at least one other. Last year, the Reception Year group was taught alongside the whole of key stage 1. This year, they are taught with Year 1.
- Potentially, there could be many barriers to ensuring that children get off to a good start at Gaddesden Row. For example, the classroom is used as a dining room at lunchtime. Therefore, all activities in this room have to be put away before, and got out again after, lunch. There is also no full-time teaching assistant allocated to the class as there is no necessity to do so. However, this limits the freedom that children have to the outside learning environment.
- You, your new teacher for this class and an early years consultant have worked extremely hard to overcome these barriers. The setting is very bright, inviting and stimulating. Children clearly enjoy their learning and settle quickly alongside their classmates. One child explained that he was making pancakes from sand and mud, copying what the teacher had done in the classroom when making real pancakes.
- The teacher knows the children in this class well. Provision is appropriate to their individual needs and ensures that timetabled access to the outside area is provided. Following an audit of the early years classroom, the governors have allocated £2,000 to improve the provision. This will ensure that the outdoor space, in particular, further develops children's reading, writing and mathematics skills during their child-initiated learning.
- You accept that there have not been enough children who exceed the expectations at the end of the early years. Since your arrival, for example, you have highlighted that at least two pupils did not achieve their potential in the early years. You have already highlighted that the same will not be repeated this year for children in the Reception class. Current children's needs are being met well and their achievement is clearly on track to achieve what they are capable

of, preparing them well for Year 1.

- My fourth key line of enquiry related to how well governors hold leaders to account for the achievement of disadvantaged pupils who receive additional funding. This is because it is the responsibility of governors to ensure that this funding has a direct impact on pupils' progress. Although small in numbers, this group constitutes 20% of the total pupil population at Gaddesden Row.
- Governors receive detailed reports from you on how well all pupils are doing. This includes a separate section on the barriers to learning that disadvantaged pupils at the school face, and pupils' achievement. The provision that you have put in place is varied and designed to meet the needs of each individual pupil. Access to musical instrument tuition, additional learning at home and one-to-one tuition are but a few of the specific interventions you have introduced.
- The impact of this provision is well evidenced. Pupils' self-esteem, confidence and development of relationships with others have all improved. You and your team are mindful of the support that some families need and ensure that this is organised. For example, through working with the attendance officer, some pupils' attendance has improved. The school has also engaged the services of a counsellor for pupils. This has improved pupils' ability to learn to control their feelings and there have been fewer behavioural incidents, particularly at lunchtime.
- Pupils' progress is tracked carefully and evidence in pupils' books and the school's own assessment information confirm that pupils are largely making good progress. Several are on track to achieve the higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics. Where this is not the case, pupils are currently one step away from achieving what they are capable of. You are confident that most will make the progress they can by the end of the academic year.
- My last line of enquiry related to what leaders are doing to encourage better attendance. This is because the school's rates of absence and persistent absence are much higher than the national average and have been for some time.
- While there are doubtless good reasons for some pupils' absence, and you track this very carefully, there are many pupils who could be at school more regularly and are not. You and your school secretary follow up any absence rigorously. You insist on parents calling the office and reporting why their child is not in school for whatever reason.
- Despite leaders' and governors' best efforts and an array of initiatives, some pupils still do not arrive at school punctually and regularly. Some parents insist on taking their children out of school during term time. This has a direct impact on many of those pupils' learning and progress, as we could see in their books.
- You constantly reiterate to parents the importance of their children attending school. Certificates are given to encourage pupils to attend more regularly. You and governors will not authorise any leave during school term time. Pupils say they know how important it is to come to school. What is more, they enjoy coming to school and do not like to miss the 'fun' learning.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers have high expectations of all pupils, including those who are most able, to ensure that they make the best progress they can
- teachers provide pupils with more opportunities to practise their basic skills in writing and mathematics and to apply them across the curriculum
- absence and persistent absence decreases so that they are more in line with the national average.

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

Ruth Brock

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I spoke with you, your assistant headteacher, and the chair of governors. I also had a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. You and I observed learning across all year groups. During that time, I spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at the work in their English and mathematics books. Together with you and your assistant headteacher, I looked at pupils' work in their writing, mathematics and topic books. I met with a group of pupils formally to talk with them about their school experience. I also took into consideration the views of 10 staff and 18 pupils in the online surveys, and of 15 parents, which included text messages, who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. I viewed a range of school documentation, including information related to safeguarding, attendance, pupils' progress, the curriculum, the school's development plan and self-evaluation document.