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Mrs H Mackay
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Mackay

Short inspection of Fir Bank Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 2 May 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 February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You are a well-respected headteacher who has established a culture of high expectations in which everyone is valued. The school's motto, 'Where everyone matters', underpins all that the school does. Over recent years, you have faced many challenges in relation to staffing. This has hindered the rate of school improvement you would have liked in some areas. Nevertheless, you have improved the quality of teaching and strengthened the leadership capacity at the school. You have recently introduced a middle leadership team. These leaders, while new to their roles, are beginning to have a positive impact in their areas of responsibility. Leaders demonstrate a thorough and clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. Governors and your staffing team share your drive and ambition that all pupils will achieve. Teaching has stabilised and improvements are starting to pay dividends. Consequently, the school is improving.

Morale is high in school. Members of staff who responded to the online survey stated that they are proud to work at the school. You ensure that teachers receive many opportunities to learn new skills and improve their teaching. Governors are knowledgeable and ensure that they have a wide set of skills which they use to challenge and support you. They are fully involved in monitoring the school's improvement priorities.

Pupils enjoy coming to school and their behaviour is good. As a result, attendance across the school is above the national average. Pupils have a strong understanding of the school's values and are proud that they are part of the school community. Pupils work hard in lessons and are keen to learn from their mistakes. This is because of the supportive relationships they have with staff and each other. All of the parents and carers who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, are supportive of the school.

At the time of the last inspection, leaders were asked to increase the level of challenge in lessons and set sharp targets for pupils so that more reach high levels of attainment. Inspection evidence that was gathered demonstrated that pupils know what they are learning in lessons and how they can improve. Pupils have many opportunities to improve their learning or challenge themselves further. They were keen to tell me that they value this and about how it helps them to improve.

Current school assessment information and the work in pupils' books show that pupils are making good progress, and achievement is rising at the higher standard, especially in key stage 1 in reading, writing and mathematics. However, although overall pupils' progress is good, you agreed that the progress of the most able pupils in key stage 2 needs to accelerate further, so that a greater proportion achieve at the higher standard.

The previous inspection report also stated that leaders need to provide more opportunities for pupils to apply and practise their mathematical skills across the curriculum. Work in pupils' books and the conversations that I had with pupils demonstrate that this has been achieved. Additionally, leaders were asked to ensure that school plans set clear and sharp timescales. Leaders have implemented detailed and rigorous action plans, which have measurable targets and timescales. These are regularly reviewed with governors, who challenge staff to ensure that targets are achieved.

During the inspection, we discussed the next steps required to enable the school to improve further. You agreed that the improvements made to the teaching of reading need to embed further so that greater proportions of pupils achieve at the expected and higher standard across the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The safeguarding leader makes sure that records are detailed and of high quality. There is a strong culture of keeping children safe in the school, and all members of staff take their role seriously. Staff and governors receive comprehensive training and, as a result, they are clear about what to do if they have any concerns about pupils' safety or well-being. Leaders make checks on staff when they are recruited to ensure that they are suitable to work with children.

Leaders work effectively with external agencies to support children and their families. Pupils I spoke to know how to keep themselves safe in a range of different

situations, including when they are online. They all feel safe at school and are confident that all staff will support them if they have any concerns. Parents who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, were all in agreement that their children are safe and happy.

Inspection findings

- This inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these looked at the progress pupils are making in their phonic skills in Year 1. There is a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics across the early years and key stage 1. Teachers are knowledgeable and plan learning activities that meet pupils' individual needs. They check the progress that pupils make and take decisive action if they need extra support to catch up. Most pupils read with confidence, using their phonic skills to read unfamiliar words. As a result, the proportion of pupils achieving the phonics check in Year 1 has risen significantly over the last three years and is now in line with the national average.
- We also looked at pupils' achievement in reading across the school and listened to pupils read. This is because data of national assessment was below average in 2016. You acted promptly, and the teaching of reading was made a whole-school priority. Leaders analysed the barriers that pupils faced in their reading and swiftly implemented a range of strategies to improve pupils' outcomes. Pupils in key stage 1 improved their phonic skills, and, in key stage 2, teachers put a focus on supporting pupils' inference and comprehension skills. As a result, there is now a daily whole-school approach to the development of pupils' reading skills. The English leader has accessed relevant training and supports staff effectively, so that they have the necessary skills and understanding. As a result of actions taken by leaders, achievement in 2017 rose across the school at the expected and higher standard. Additionally, the school's assessment information and the work in pupils' books confirm that pupils across the school now make good progress. Although the teaching of reading is now good, you are not complacent. You acknowledge that the new systems need embedding and adjusting, to build on the improvements, so that greater numbers of pupils achieve at the expected and higher standard.
- The last key line of enquiry considered pupils' progress in mathematics in key stage 2. Data from national assessments shows that achievement in mathematics has been below the national average. You quite rightly recognised that the teaching of mathematics required further development, and this is a key focus for school improvement. You have taken practical actions to tackle this priority. Your newly appointed leader for mathematics attends relevant training and works alongside senior leaders promoting improvements in mathematics across the school. Teachers have received a range of training and support to deepen their knowledge and skills. This has improved pupils' problem-solving and reasoning skills. Teachers now make sure that pupils use a range of practical equipment to improve their mathematical understanding. As a result, an increased number of pupils are now attaining at the expected standard. We agreed that, despite this rise in achievement, the challenge for the most able is not fully consistent in order to ensure that they make enough progress to reach the higher standard in key stage 2.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- ensure that the progress of the most able pupils in key stage 2 accelerates further, so that a greater proportion achieve at the higher standard
- further embed and adjust the improvements made to the teaching of reading, so that a greater proportion of pupils achieve at the expected and higher standard across the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Julie Barlow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I observed teaching and learning and scrutinised examples of pupils' work. I met with you, senior leaders, the school business manager and the designated leader for safeguarding and attendance. I met with three governors and spoke to a representative of the local authority. I spoke with six pupils in key stage 2 and with pupils informally in lessons and around the school. I also heard pupils read.

I evaluated the 33 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and took account of the 33 free-text responses from parents. I also took account of 22 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 77 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire. I reviewed a range of school documents. These included: the school's self-evaluation; the school's development plans and assessment records; minutes of the governing body meetings; safeguarding documentation and records relating to pupils' behaviour and attendance. I also considered information posted on the school's website.