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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Emma Monaghan
Headteacher
Gillas Lane Primary Academy
Seaton Avenue
Houghton le Spring
Tyne and Wear
DH5 8EH

Dear Mrs Monaghan

Short inspection of Gillas Lane Primary Academy

Following my visit to the school on 3 July 2019, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in December 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

Upon entry to your school, it was clear that you and your staff have created an environment where all pupils are encouraged to have the confidence to contribute to learning and celebrate their successes. Parents and carers speak highly of the care and support all pupils receive at the school. Pupils speak confidently about how they enjoy being challenged and encouraged to 'not give up'. They have a full understanding of what the term 'growth mindset' means to them.

You have dealt with the recommendations made at the time of the previous inspection of your predecessor school. Pupils are given the time they need to practise and develop their skills. Teachers consistently provide them with the guidance they need to improve their work and meet the learning challenges they have been set. You have ensured that there is a focus on improving pupils' writing across all year groups. This has resulted in pupils making good progress in their writing across the full range of the subjects and topics they study. Phonics teaching is engaging. Teachers focus on the important techniques which are required for pupils to make good progress in their learning. Pupils sound out words and recognise them in their reading.

Teachers set high expectations in the classroom of all pupils. In all lessons observed and all books scrutinised, teachers provide pupils with learning challenges. These challenges very clearly identify the success criteria which pupils need to meet if they

are to deepen and extend their learning. Pupils respond well to this approach, and they told me that they think it is a useful part of their learning. It helps them to focus on the tasks and what they want to achieve in each lesson. Teachers support pupils in their learning by providing them with written and verbal guidance. This helps them meet learning challenges which pupils may find demanding. Teaching assistants are used skilfully by teachers to support the learning of those pupils who require appropriate prompts and guidance. They successfully encourage pupils to engage in their independent learning. School leaders have worked closely with leaders in the multi-academy trust to establish an accurate view of the strengths, and areas where more development is required in the school. Leaders' evaluations closely agree with my findings from this inspection.

In the lessons I observed, pupils' attitudes to learning were exemplary. Pupils were keen to contribute to their learning through their responses to questions and the tasks teachers set for them. Pupils' workbooks I scrutinised were well presented too. Pupils told me that they appreciated the support they get from teachers and from each other. They said that during social times and around the school, they get on well together. They are enthusiastic about the outside play and learning facilities, which they make use of during the lunch break. These outside play sessions are supervised and structured by school staff. Pupils talked confidently and proudly about the school, and agree it is one of the best schools they know of.

Published information indicates that attainment at the end of key stage 2 continued to be average in 2018. However, pupils' progress in reading was less strong, and too few pupils have achieved the higher standards in reading which you are aiming for. You have responded by ensuring that reading and the development of language and literacy is at the heart of everything you do. You and your staff work effectively with parents and carers. Together, you support children's learning, and, their reading. The 'everybody, every night' approach to reading is embedded in the culture of the school. Parents, carers, staff, pupils and governors talk about the approach fluently and recognise its importance. The school's achievement information, and my scrutiny of pupils' workbooks, reading diaries and listening to pupils reading, showed me that overall, current pupils are making good progress in their reading. Pupils read well at your school, using their skills in phonics to access books that interest and engage them at appropriate levels.

Published information in 2018 also indicated that the number of pupils achieving the expected standard in phonics was lower than you were aiming for. You have responded by having a clear view of what good teaching of phonics should be. Teachers are using a combination of structured sounding and blending techniques, along with lively activities, to encourage pupils to develop their phonics skills effectively. During the inspection, I was able to observe this at first hand. Pupils are making good progress in their phonics, enjoying the sessions and participating in every activity with enthusiasm.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders and governors fulfil their legal safeguarding duties well. They have ensured that staff and governors are trained regularly. All pupils, including the most vulnerable pupils, are well supported. Policies and procedures are fit for purpose and day-to-day routines are secure. Records, including the single central record of checks on adults' suitability to work and volunteer at the school, are diligently maintained. You and leaders work successfully and extensively with local agencies to be sure that the needs of pupils and their families are addressed effectively.

Pupils say that behaviour is good in the school and that they always feel safe. They say that bullying is very rare, but if it were to happen, teachers and staff will help to resolve the problems. They have great faith that any adult in the school will listen to them and act on any worries that they may have.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, we agreed that we would focus on: how well leaders ensure that pupils' reading improves; how well teaching ensures that pupils make stronger progress in phonics; how well teaching ensures that disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make strong progress in their writing; how leaders are taking action to improve the attendance of pupils; and how leaders and governors ensure that the school continues to improve.
- Published performance information for the end of key stage 2 in 2018 indicates that pupils' progress in reading was not as strong as in writing or mathematics. Over the past two years, you have embedded a culture whereby governors, staff, pupils, parents and carers value reading for pleasure and for purpose. During my visits to lessons, I observed pupils engaged in paired reading in a variety of contexts. It was clear from listening to pupils read that they are reading books which are accessible to them and are closely matched to their reading and phonics skills. Pupils are reading a wide range of books. Those pupils who are most able are reading books which are challenging, but equally as important, of interest to them as well. Pupils' reading records provide evidence that the 'everybody, every night' approach is having an impact. The records show that pupils are reading every day. It is clear that many parents and carers are supporting their children and the school by listening to pupils read and recording their successes. Consequently, pupils are making good progress in their reading.
- Published information in 2018 indicated that the number of pupils achieving the expected standard in phonics was lower than the national average. You have a very clear vision about how phonics teaching should look if it is to have the most success. You have been able to share this vision with your staff and it has been translated into action. All pupils engage enthusiastically with the phonics programme, which allows them to sound out letter combinations and blend them together. As a result, they can read words fluently. You have ensured too, that those pupils who may be falling behind others get the extra help they need to catch up with others. When observing pupils reading a variety of materials during

my visits to lessons, and when listening to pupils read, it became clear that pupils are now making good progress in their phonics learning.

- Leaders ensure that the additional funding the school receives to support pupils who are disadvantaged and those with SEND is used wisely and effectively. You and your staff provide classroom support and additional interventions for those pupils who require it. Consequently, pupils make the progress expected of them. The school's own information evidences that gaps are closing between these pupils' progress in writing, reading and mathematics, and that of others who have similar starting points. The evidence I was able to collect through lesson observations and looking at pupils' books confirms this. In a wider sense, you and leaders have been determined to develop these pupils through structured play and outside learning opportunities.
- For those pupils with SEND, who lack the confidence to participate in traditional sporting activities, you have introduced unique and tailored sports. These have engaged them and encouraged them to participate. As a result, these pupils have represented the school regionally, with considerable success. It is in no small part that due to this approach, pupils in your school arrive daily with positive attitudes to their school experience and their learning.
- Leaders have identified those pupils who are persistently absent from the school and they have taken the appropriate actions to encourage pupils, parents and carers to more positively engage in learning. School information confirms the impact of these actions, and that persistent absence has reduced significantly. Although the level of persistent absenteeism has reduced, the levels of overall absence remain stubbornly above the national average. I am confident that the school is doing everything possible to make the necessary improvements under the current attendance procedures of the multi-academy trust. However, you agree that some changes in trust policy, relating to attendance procedures, would be helpful to the school and would potentially increase the impact you require to reduce absenteeism further.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- reading remains a high priority in the school, so that the culture of reading is further strengthened, and all pupils make good or better progress
- phonics teaching, and the extra support required for some pupils, continues to develop so that more pupils reach the expected standard
- the attendance of pupils improves so that it is at least at, or above, the national average.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sunderland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Barry Found
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with the headteacher and a range of other school leaders to discuss the school's effectiveness. I visited classrooms with the headteacher to observe pupils' learning, talk to pupils and look at their work. I heard Year 1 and Year 2 pupils read, and I also looked at the quality of work in a wide range of pupils' books. I considered the 13 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 12 free-text comments, 11 responses to the staff survey and 26 responses to the pupil questionnaire. I had meetings with groups of pupils to discuss their views about the school and spoke to pupils informally.

I met with three governors, including the chair of the governing body. I evaluated the school's safeguarding arrangements. A wide range of documents was examined, including: the school's self-evaluation; school improvement planning; information about pupils' progress; and various policies. I also examined the school's website.