

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Mrs Tracy Webb
Headteacher
Wolverham Primary and Nursery School
Milton Road
Wolverham
Ellesmere Port
Cheshire
CH65 5AT

Dear Mrs Webb

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Wolverham Primary and Nursery School, Cheshire

Following my visit to your school on 22 September, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring 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

During my visit, I met with you, school leaders and members of the teaching staff. I met one governor and spoke to the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the local authority by telephone. I chatted to a small group of pupils to gain their views on teaching, learning and behaviour. You and I visited every classroom at least once to talk to pupils, observe them at work and look at their books. Our visits concentrated on pupils' learning in reading, writing and phonics (letters and the sounds they make).

I scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. I also considered records of your checks on teaching, your improvement plans and minutes from governing body meetings. I evaluated your most recent information on pupils' outcomes, including the 2015 unvalidated results. I also took account of the 58 responses to Parent View.

Context

Wolverham is smaller than the average-sized primary school, although it is growing rapidly over time. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language are lower than found nationally. The proportion of disabled pupils or those who have special educational needs is above average. More pupils join the school at different times of the year than found in other schools across the country. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium funding is more than twice the national average. Pupil premium is additional funding provided by the government for pupils who are known to be eligible for free schools meals or who are looked after by the local authority.

There have been a number of changes since the previous inspection in October 2012. Three new teachers have joined the school and an assistant headteacher has been appointed. Three additional classrooms have been built. The early years has been extended to include provision for two-year-old children.

The monitoring inspection was in response to falling standards at the end of Key Stage 2 and the weaker progress disadvantaged pupils make in reading.

Standards at the end of Year 6 have declined since the school was last inspected. They were below average in 2014, with pupils faring less well in reading. This was due to weaker teaching in the past. The unvalidated data for 2015 signal a marked improvement. Most pupils made better than expected progress from their lower than average starting points to reach standards that match, and sometimes exceed, the levels expected for their age. Your own data confirm that the decline is being halted and pupils are benefiting from stronger teaching, day in and day out. This is beginning to help those pupils who have a tougher journey than most to make up for lost ground.

You know the school inside out. Our visits to classrooms held no surprises because you keep a close watch on teaching and the difference this makes to pupils' progress. Consequently, you spot weaknesses early and take effective action to bring about improvement. Your high expectations of staff and pupils mean you do not accept excuses, challenging conversations are not shirked and weaker teaching is not allowed to fester. As a result, ineffective teaching has been wiped out. Pupils are making greater gains in their learning because most teachers demand the best. Teachers introduce new work carefully and provide lots of helpful examples so pupils know how to set about their tasks. Ample opportunities to talk and share ideas mean that pupils are happy to put pen to paper.

Less-able pupils, disabled pupils and pupils with special educational needs are keeping pace with their peers because of the support they receive in the classroom and through small group sessions. Increasing levels of challenge for the most-able pupils mean that a greater proportion are exceeding the levels expected for their

age. The achievement of disadvantaged pupils is more variable. Achievement gaps are closing quickly at the end of Year 2 and in some other year groups. There are some early signs of success in Year 6. A greater proportion of disadvantaged pupils made better than expected progress in writing and mathematics than in the past. Nonetheless, the gap widened in reading because this group did not make the same gains as their peers in the school and nationally. You keep a close check on pupils' progress across the school. However, this does not go far enough in shining a spotlight on the achievement of this particular group.

Pupils' achievement in reading is becoming stronger across the whole school. You have invested time and energy in overhauling the strategies for teaching reading so that there is a systematic whole-school approach. Teachers and teaching assistants are in no doubt about the role they play in equipping pupils with the skills to be successful readers. Teaching skills and subject knowledge have been honed through extensive training with external consultants and ample opportunities to learn from best practice within the school. Nothing has been left to chance. The subject leaders for English have checked, and then checked again, to make sure everyone is following the new ways of working. These leaders offer insightful advice and set targets for improvement which help everyone do their best.

These strategies are paying dividends. The teaching of phonics runs like clockwork. Teaching sessions are jam-packed with lively activities that help pupils make sense of the sounds that letters make so they can read new and familiar words. As a result, the number of pupils meeting the Year 1 phonics check matches the national average. This is a real turnaround. Two years ago, only one pupil in every 10 reached this threshold. The focused reading sessions are equally effective, particularly in Key Stage 2, because adults ask probing questions which help pupils read for meaning and pleasure. This is not always as successful for younger pupils. Sometimes, adults do not give pupils enough opportunity to practise reading and reluctant readers are not always challenged to do their best. Older pupils read with confidence and are gaining a range of strategies to help them tackle unfamiliar words and phrases. This means they do not give up when they encounter difficulties and they read with expression and fluency. Pupils talk about reading with enthusiasm. Their good knowledge of different authors reflects their desire to read widely and often.

The recent improvements in Key Stage 2 are not reflected fully in the early years and Key Stage 1. Although standards are improving slowly, not enough children leave Reception ready for the demands of Year 1. This means some have to catch up, and not everyone is able to rise to this challenge. Consequently, standards at the end of Year 2 are lower than the national average. You have already unearthed some weaknesses in pupils' writing skills. Gaps in basic spelling patterns, simple punctuation and letter formation are not always tackled vigorously. Sometimes, pupils are given too much support in lessons, which stops them from having a go themselves so they can try out new ideas and learn from their mistakes.

Pupils are proud of their school and eager to do their best. They are relaxed and happy in lessons because they know adults care for them and they are free from teasing if they find their work hard or make a mistake. They have no complaints about school; they do not think anything needs to change to make their time at school more enjoyable or safer. Parents are similarly positive about the school. All who responded to Parent View agree that pupils are happy and safe. The overwhelming majority would recommend Wolverham to other parents.

You have not ignored the area for improvement left by the inspectors when they visited your school in 2012. Your work to raise attendance is beginning to bear fruit. Attendance is improving slowly, although it is still too low compared with other schools. You have been successful in reducing the number of pupils who miss large chunks of time from school. In particular, disabled pupils or those with special educational needs now attend school more frequently than they did in the past. You know there is still more to do to ensure that all pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged, cross the school threshold every day.

Governors are playing their part in supporting you and other leaders in driving change. They have a good insight into the school. Events such as 'Governor of the Month' provide them with frequent opportunities to visit classrooms and talk to teachers and pupils. They have a good grasp of data; they know what has been achieved but are equally sure about what needs to happen next. Governors know how the pupil premium funding is spent, but they do not ask enough searching questions about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. As a result, they are not able to check the impact of this additional funding closely enough to help inform future decisions.

Your priorities to bring about further change are spot-on. Your success in raising pupils' achievement in reading is a clear sign that you, the governors and your teaching staff have the skills, determination and capacity to bring about rapid and effective change.

External support

The local authority provides 'light touch' support to the school. Local authority officers set great store in your proven track record to tackle weaknesses head-on. As a result, they are using your skills and those of the governing body to support other schools within the local area. Nevertheless, local authority officers do keep an eye on the school and provide support as and when it is needed. You have recently benefited from local authority guidance to ensure that your provision for two-year-olds meets all necessary requirements. You select external support carefully to make sure it meets the needs of the school. The work of external consultants has helped you drive up pupils' achievement in reading across every year group.

Priorities for further improvement

- Lift achievement in the early years and Key Stage 1 by:
 - making sure a greater proportion of children are ready for Year 1 by the end of Reception
 - ensuring weaknesses in spelling, punctuation and letter formation are always tackled vigorously.
- Improve the systems for keeping a closer eye on disadvantaged pupils so that this group comes to school regularly and achievement gaps close in all year groups.
- Ensure that governors ask more searching questions about the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and use this information to make decisions about pupil premium spend.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester, to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector