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Mr Courtney Freese
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Freese

Short inspection of Merrylands Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 11 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good

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

There have been a number of significant changes since the school became part of the Berlusduna Academy Trust (the trust) in September 2016. A new headteacher took up post, as the previous headteacher became the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust. A number of staff, including you, left the school to take on leadership roles at other schools in the trust. In 2016, the school expanded its early years provision by opening a Nursery. At the same time, the autism support centre (ASC) opened, which provides specialist provision for up to eight pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHC) for autism spectrum disorder.

The headteacher left the school during this academic year and the trust arranged for you to return as executive headteacher in February 2019. Together, you and the CEO of the trust have worked to maintain stability in leadership until a new headteacher takes up her role in September 2019. Most parents are very happy with the quality of education that their children experience. However, a significant minority of parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, say that communication has not been as good as they would like. They also say that they have not been confident in the leadership and management of the school. The efforts that you have made to address these issues have been recognised. Parents say that you are approachable and available to discuss their concerns. Nonetheless, both you and trust representatives recognise that there is still work to do to improve

communication with some parents to regain their confidence in the school during a period of transition.

Pupils enjoy their learning experience at Merrylands Primary School. They like the opportunities they have to learn a wide range of subjects. Well-chosen topics and themes capture and build upon pupils' interests, which contribute strongly to the positive attitudes to learning shown by almost all pupils. This in turn contributes to the good progress made by most pupils. Pupils appreciate the trips and clubs that are on offer. These support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. Pupils also value the opportunities available to take on responsibility, for example as members of the school council, eco-warriors and door monitors. They strongly believe that everyone has a right to be treated equally. Pupils understand why it is important to respect difference and the beliefs and cultures of others. They are supported to do so by your carefully considered programme of assemblies and curriculum, including your personal, social and health education (PSHE) lessons.

Leaders, governors and the trust have an accurate view of the school's many strengths and those areas that could be even better. Aspirations and expectations are high, both for pupils and staff. Your plans for improvement focus on the right priorities and are underpinned by thoughtful actions based upon accurate self-evaluation.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, the trust and governors ensure that all those working in the school give keeping pupils safe the highest priority. You ensure that all staff have regular training and updates so that they can recognise the signs that a pupil may be at risk of harm. This includes the risks of extremism and radicalisation. The designated safeguarding leader is knowledgeable and supported by three other staff trained to the same level. Safeguarding leaders act quickly upon any concerns that are reported. When necessary, referrals to external agencies are made swiftly, so that pupils and their families get any help that they need in a timely fashion.

Almost all pupils say that they feel safe in the school. Responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and parents that I spoke to, agree. Pupils learn how to keep safe in a variety of situations through PSHE and assemblies, including talks from visiting speakers. Pupils understand the difference between bullying and unpleasant, unacceptable behaviour. The pupils that I spoke to said that they were confident to report any concerns and that these, including any instances of bullying, would be dealt with effectively by adults. Their views and those of most parents did not reflect a minority of free-text comments submitted to Parent View.

Leaders ensure that the checks needed to make sure that adults are suitable to work in school are completed thoroughly. The single central record of these checks is accurately maintained and regularly monitored by you, the CEO and governors.

Governors fulfil their responsibilities for safeguarding diligently. They have a good understanding of the risks that pupils face and participate in the safeguarding

training you provide for all staff. Governors make sure that policies and procedures reflect the latest published guidance and support the ethos of keeping pupils safe from all types of risk. They ensure that statutory requirements for safeguarding children in the early years provision are met.

Inspection findings

- The proportions of pupils attaining at least the expected standards in reading, writing, mathematics and science by the end of key stages 1 and 2 have been in line with, or above, the national averages over the past three years. Increasing proportions of pupils have attained the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check. Assessment information you provided, and my scrutiny of pupils' work, indicates that these standards have been maintained.
- Teachers routinely plan activities that build on pupils' prior learning and that provide appropriate stretch and challenge to pupils of different capabilities. One pupil told me, 'Work is hard but the right sort of hard.' Pupils are encouraged to think deeply and achieve their best in all subjects.
- Teachers' expectations of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), disadvantaged pupils and pupils who speak English as an additional language are equally high as they are for other pupils with similar starting points across the curriculum. This means that most pupils make good progress, whatever their prior attainment, in a range of subjects.
- In English, pupils develop their vocabulary, read with confidence and appropriate comprehension for their age and write for a variety of different purposes and audiences. In mathematics, pupils of all abilities are encouraged to develop their reasoning skills.
- Teachers usually provide opportunities to practise English and mathematics skills in other subjects. Topic books show that pupils' writing is usually of the same good standard that it is in their English books. In science and geography, many pupils use their mathematics skills to present and interpret data.
- Your carefully constructed curriculum provides worthwhile learning opportunities that develop and build on pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills in foundation subjects. My scrutiny of work and observations of learning show that most pupils make equally good progress in these subjects as they do in English and mathematics.
- Overall, the number of pupils with SEND is lower than in most primary schools. However, the establishment of the ASC means that the proportion of pupils with an EHC plan is above average.
- Most pupils with SEND make good progress from their starting points because they receive effective support from teachers and teaching assistants. When observing learning and scrutinising work with you and the deputy headteacher, we typically saw no discernible difference in the quality of work, or progress, of pupils with SEND and their classmates with similar starting points.

- My observations of learning and analysis of information provided show that the ASC is effective in helping almost all the pupils it serves to make noticeable strides in their academic and personal development.
- Your inclusion leader and autism champion have ensured that staff have had training in how to support pupils with specific needs. They have correctly identified what further training is needed to further improve provision. This additional training has already been arranged.
- Regular assessment accurately identifies pupils who are falling behind. Additional, targeted support helps them to catch up. For example, most pupils who do not achieve the expected standard in the phonics screening check get extra help that is effective in developing their ability to read and understand texts.
- The early years provision provides a great start to children's educational experience. Adults in the nursery and reception classes are highly skilled practitioners. They plan and adapt activities to meet children's different skills, aptitudes and needs.
- The early years curriculum has been carefully thought through. Activities give equal regard to all areas of learning, while ensuring that early reading, writing and mathematics are promoted well.
- Over their time in the nursery and reception classes, children develop into confident, inquisitive learners. They are well supported when they make transitions between classes and phases of education. Increasing numbers of children leave Reception with the skills and dispositions needed to be successful learners in Year 1.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school is typically very good. Lessons flow smoothly because the very large majority of pupils understand and respond well to teachers' high expectations of behaviour. Indeed, pupils have high expectations of how others should behave.
- Due to the school's inclusive nature, there is a small group of pupils in the school with very challenging behaviour. You and other leaders do not accept excuses for this behaviour and take appropriate action to address it. This includes using fixed-period exclusions appropriately and modifying your responses to managing the behaviour of individuals. While this has resulted in improved behaviour for most of this group, there remains a small number where you have been less successful in helping them manage their behaviour.
- You, governors and the trust have rightly identified that you need to communicate better to some staff why your different approaches to managing behaviour are appropriate for some pupils. Currently some pupils and staff feel that approaches to managing behaviour are not always consistent.
- Most pupils' enjoyment of school is reflected by their high attendance. You celebrate and reward high attendance. Robust systems are in place to support and, where necessary, challenge families where pupils' attendance has not been good enough. Consequently, those pupils who have had high rates of absence are, for the most part, attending more regularly.

- Despite the best efforts of you and other leaders, there remain a small number of pupils who are absent too frequently without good reason. Consequently, persistent absence has been above average for the last two years and this remains the case this academic year.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the attendance of the core of pupils who are absent too frequently improves
- all teachers understand and are consistent in their use of strategies to help a small group of pupils better manage their own behaviour
- they continue to improve communication, so that all parents understand and support leaders' aims and aspirations for the school and its pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Wilson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I held meetings with you and your senior leaders, the CEO of the trust, the early years leader, two members of teaching staff, the pupil liaison officer, two members of the governing body and a trustee. I met formally with a group of pupils and spoke to pupils in lessons and at lunchtime to gather their views on the school. I made short visits to lessons in all key stages, including the early years, to observe learning and scrutinise pupils work in a range of subjects. These visits were made with you or the deputy headteacher. I also heard a small group of pupils from Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 read to their teachers.

I reviewed a range of the school's documentation and policies, including improvement plans, documentation and records relating to safeguarding, assessment information and documents relating to the work of the governing body. I considered the 59 responses to Ofsted's online survey for parents, Parent View, including 31 free-text comments. I also spoke to parents before the start of the school day. I considered the 43 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. There were no responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey. I analysed responses to parent and pupil surveys recently carried out by the school.