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Mrs Lynn Salter
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Salter

Short inspection of Bower Grove School

Following my visit to the school on 9 January 2018 with Sue Bzikot, Ofsted Inspector, 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. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in certain areas. This may indicate that the school is improving towards being outstanding. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

You became headteacher in September 2015, and Bower Grove has improved under your dynamic leadership. The local authority, governing body and leaders of other schools value your drive and ambition. You put pupils first and want the school to be the best it can be. You have not been afraid to make difficult decisions and have strengthened the leadership of safeguarding.

Pupils and parents and carers are clear that your school makes a positive difference to their lives. As one parent summarised, 'Since my son has been at Bower Grove, his life and our lives have been turned around'. Older pupils are clear about the improved opportunities that you provide them with. They talk with passion about the GCSEs they are now studying, with some pupils not quite believing they have got this far after an unsuccessful time in mainstream school. Pupils who would not or could not read are now making strong progress and can fully access the curriculum.

Leaders and governors know the school's many strengths. You have significantly improved pupils' behaviour since the last inspection, including those who have

previously been excluded from other schools. The school is a calm place to learn, where pupils thrive. You are working closely with parents and pupils to improve attendance levels. This work is having a positive impact. A greater proportion of pupils are coming to school regularly and the number of pupils who are persistently absent is declining. However, you are ambitious for all pupils to attend regularly where possible, and want these improvements to be sustained.

At the time of the last inspection, leaders were asked to develop the leadership skills of others. You have done this. Inspectors were able to work closely with a range of knowledgeable and effective leaders because you have given all of them clear responsibilities. Leaders value the trust and freedoms you afford them but are also clear that you hold them fully to account for the progress that pupils make.

The teaching of early reading and phonics has improved significantly since the last inspection. Pupils make exceptional progress from their wide-ranging starting points. Most staff are very knowledgeable about your chosen systematic approach to teach phonics. However, you also recognise that newer members of the staff team do not yet have the same levels of understanding.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Over time, you have strengthened this work. You acted swiftly and decisively to improve some administrative aspects of your work following an external audit of the school's safeguarding practices.

You have created a culture where all staff listen carefully to pupils. As a result, staff are diligent in recording any concerns about pupils' safety or well-being. Leaders act swiftly in evaluating such concerns. Referrals to the early help service, and those made in accordance with the 'Prevent' duty, are timely and detailed. Leaders work well with other agencies, including social care.

Pupils feel happy and safe in school, including those who have not had positive experiences in their previous schools. Pupils value the extra lessons or assemblies that staff deliver in response to issues that arise in school. Parents feel that pupils are safe.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, inspectors evaluated: pupils' progress in early reading and phonics; how well prepared the oldest pupils are for life after Bower Grove; the impact of leaders' actions on pupils' attendance; and the behaviour of pupils.
- Pupils make exceptional progress in their reading. Pupils who join the school with little or no phonic knowledge make rapid progress. Established staff have very good subject knowledge because they have been well trained. As a result, phonics is taught systematically and very effectively. Staff use assessment information well. They know exactly what phonic knowledge pupils have and therefore carefully plan for pupils' next steps in their reading journey. Pupils who

have low reading ages make extremely strong progress. Leaders know that some newly appointed staff are not yet as well trained in delivering phonics as they need to be.

- Older pupils are extremely well prepared for life after Bower Grove. Leaders have carefully adapted the curriculum and have improved pupils' behaviour. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of pupils who leave school ready, willing and able to join mainstream colleges. Governors are ambitious for pupils. Staff that support the oldest pupils when they move on to college were initially employed through additional funding. However, governors have continued to fund this work because of the difference it makes. Past pupils come back to school to share their success stories with current pupils, in order to help allay any concerns pupils might have about moving on to continue their education elsewhere.
- Older pupils are proud of their school and their own achievements. Pupils talk with great enthusiasm about the ambition that staff have for them and the progress they have made as a result. Pupils who were excluded from their previous schools and did not want to learn are transformed through the highly effective teaching and learning at Bower Grove. They feel, and are, very well prepared for their next steps in education.
- Pupils' attendance is improving. Fewer pupils are persistently absent. Leaders consistently track pupils' absence so they know, for example, which pupils' medical needs have an impact on published information regarding attendance. When some pupils move schools, leaders make sure that they keep these pupils on Bower Grove attendance registers until they start at their new school. This ensures that pupils are safe because they are not 'missing in education'. However, this does have a negative impact on the school's overall figures for attendance. Leaders recognise that as pupils' needs change, so do patterns of absence. They remain focused on reducing the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent even further.
- Parents recognise that the engaging teaching and caring culture at Bower Grove make a big difference to pupils' attitudes to school. As one parent exemplified: 'My child always hated school and getting him there was an issue. Bower Grove has changed my son's mind about school and given him a positive experience regarding education.'
- Pupils' behaviour has improved since the last inspection, and is exemplary. In classrooms, pupils are highly focused on the task in hand. Teaching and learning excite them because staff match the learning to their wide-ranging needs. Pupils are incredibly warm and welcoming. They are polite, inquisitive and keen to talk with visitors. Lunchtimes are delightful. Pupils and staff talk and eat together in a calm and welcoming environment. Pupils who have not been able to manage their behaviour properly in their previous schools thrive at Bower Grove.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they quickly and effectively train recently appointed staff to teach phonics effectively
- they sustain the improvement in reducing levels of persistent absence.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Cole
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you and your governors to review your evaluation of the school's effectiveness. Senior leaders accompanied us on visits to a number of classes. Inspectors evaluated a range of information regarding pupils' progress, and spoke to a representative of the local authority. We spoke to pupils around the school and during lunchtime. Inspectors scrutinised 24 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and considered the free-text comments. We checked the effectiveness of your safeguarding arrangements, including those relating to recruitment.