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15 June 2017

Mrs Judith Amery  
Headteacher  
St James Infant School  
St James Street  
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Northamptonshire  
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Dear Mrs Amery

### **Short inspection of St James Infant School**

Following my visit to the school on 6 June 2017, 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 June 2013.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. This is a school where children and their well-being are at the heart of its organisation. Parents, pupils and staff are proud of their school and its caring approach. Parents speak highly of the school and many outline the excellent support they and their family have received.

You realised that, in recent years, children were starting in Reception with increasingly lower skills for their age. The positive impact of the pre-school on standards are evident. These high standards are now showing through the school as those pupils who have attended the pre-school move from one year group to another. The early years is a strength, with significant improvements in the past three years in children's outcomes at the end of Reception. These are now in line with national averages. You and your leadership team know the school well and work to ensure that any identified weaknesses are addressed effectively.

You have made improvements to behaviour in lessons and around school by ensuring that it is managed consistently. Work to help pupils to take responsibility for their own actions has had a positive impact on their understanding of what good behaviour really means. There is effective support for pupils who find managing their own behaviour a challenge. The school's mascot, 'Spencer', and the 'Value Bears' ensure that pupils' personal and social development are in a language that all can relate to, focusing on cooperation, teamwork, fairness, honesty, caring and independence. You have successfully extended the role of these bears to help pupils

to understand British values.

All groups of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable, make good progress. Many pupils benefit from the breakfast club and the after-school club. A broad and engaging curriculum, supported by a good range of out-of-school clubs, ensures that pupils enjoy school and achieve well.

Governors show a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development and ensure that challenge and support are well-balanced. They monitor important aspects of the school's leadership, such as the use of the pupil premium funding. The governing body has recently undergone a series of changes in personnel and organisation and the new team knows it can be even more effective. There are good plans in place to ensure this.

You have responded effectively to the recommendations for improvement from your last inspection, resulting in reading now being a strength across the school. You and your staff have ensured that initiatives to improve reading have been introduced, monitored and refined. These have led to improvements in how phonics and reading comprehension are taught and an increased focus on pupils reading independently. Teaching in all subjects has improved partly due to good coaching, with teachers having the opportunity to teach and learn alongside your job-share co-headteacher.

You acknowledge that although much work has been undertaken to improve pupils' vocabulary in writing, there is still some inconsistency in how well writing is being taught in key stage 1. Some pupils are having too few opportunities to develop their ideas at length. We also discussed the weaker presentation of some pupils' work in Year 2, which is neither neat nor well laid out. Pupils' handwriting in Year 2 was also an area we discussed, as too few are choosing to join their letters in everyday handwriting.

In mathematics, good progress has been made in developing pupils' understanding of new concepts. However, pupils are still not always given good opportunities to develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Staff are highly trained and you have created an ethos where everyone believes that safeguarding is their responsibility and a key priority. Safeguarding is very well organised and monitored. You provide regular weekly staff updates and have led staff in reviews of serious case studies to determine what lessons can be learned.

Leaders' meticulous records for child protection ensure that all actions are followed up efficiently and tenaciously. Staff liaise well with external agencies when additional support is needed to help vulnerable pupils. Discussions between staff take place regularly, including the sharing of information to ensure that

vulnerable pupils are supported well.

You have sought external monitoring to ensure that your safeguarding is effective and you have acted on all recommendations to strengthen your procedures still further.

### **Inspection findings**

- You and your staff have continued to make improvements to the teaching of phonics. This has included further training for staff and workshops for parents so they can better support their children at home. A new reward system to encourage home reading and an increase in one-to-one reading at school have improved pupils' progress.
- Pupils of all abilities use their phonics skills well in their reading to help them to sound out unknown words. I listened to a number of pupils read and all talked animatedly about the book they were reading and their enjoyment of reading generally. New training for staff has ensured that higher-level reading skills, including those of inference, are taught more systematically.
- Significant professional development has taken place this year to improve the teaching of mathematics. Teachers now take a much more practical approach to teaching pupils new concepts. Regular short check-ups are used by teachers to ensure that pupils have understood new learning and one-to-one or small-group interventions are in place to support those who require further guidance.
- There is still evidence of some girls progressing less well in mathematics. However, this is being addressed successfully, through individual and group support. All pupils, including girls, are now much more confident in using and choosing appropriate equipment to help them with their number work and problem solving.
- Increased mixed-ability group and paired work have encouraged pupils to talk about their mathematics and what they are learning. This has helped to improve pupils' vocabulary and ability to explain their thinking and strategies. However, some teachers still limit pupils' opportunities to develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills by giving pupils activities in some lessons that simply cover skills pupils have already mastered.
- Yourself and the other school leaders have continually monitored and evaluated the impact of the use of the pupil premium funding. The pupils who are eligible for this grant are making good progress. They benefit from targeted help with reading, writing and mathematics and, where necessary, support to help them overcome individual specific barriers to learning. This includes help for pupils to manage their own behaviour and to have access to all areas of the school's rich curriculum.
- Governors monitor the school's spending of the pupil premium funding and receive regular reports detailing the impact of the school's various initiatives. This has ensured that they are in a good position to ask probing questions to ensure that best value for money is achieved.

- The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has historically been an area for improvement. The appointment of a parent support worker has greatly improved attendance and punctuality of all pupils at the school, including disadvantaged pupils. Ensuring that parents understand the importance of regular attendance, following up all absences and drawing up contracts with some parents have all helped to improve attendance.
- During the inspection, it became evident that there were some improvements still required to raise attainment and to improve progress and attainment in writing in key stage 1. You agreed that more consistency in the effectiveness of teaching of writing was needed. Initiatives this year have improved pupils' vocabulary and many pupils now write more imaginatively, choosing a range of interesting words. However, in some classes, pupils have too few opportunities to develop their ideas at length.
- In Year 2, you had already identified that pupils' presentation of their work was an area for action. Significant improvements have been made to support the physical development and letter formation for the younger pupils, so these pupils demonstrate good standards of handwriting. However, pupils' joined writing in Year 2 is not as fully developed as it could be, with too many pupils still choosing to print, except when specifically practising their joined writing.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the consistency in the teaching of writing is improved, so that pupils have better opportunities to develop their ideas at length
- in Year 2, pupils' presentation and joined handwriting are improved
- pupils have more frequent opportunities to develop their mathematical skills of problem solving and reasoning.

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

Yours sincerely

Angela Kirk  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and Gail Gynn, who is the acting headteacher two days a week as part of your phased retirement. I also met with other senior leaders, your parent support worker and designated safeguarding lead. I talked to several parents at the start of the school day and analysed Ofsted's

surveys completed by parents (Parent View), staff and pupils. I visited all classes with you and Gail Gynn to see what pupils were learning in lessons, and we carried out extensive surveys of pupils' work to see what progress they were making. I listened to a sample of pupils read and talked with many informally. We also discussed the school's assessment information showing pupils' attainment and progress. I reviewed records of attendance and safeguarding and also read various documents evaluating the school's progress. I held a discussion with four members of the governing body, including both co-chairs.