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Mrs Liz Avard
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Avard

Short inspection of Staplecross Methodist Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 4 February 2016, 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 December 2010.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You lead the school with great energy and authority and have the total respect of pupils, parents and staff alike. Because of the nature of such a small school, you have a very good working knowledge of day-to-day matters, as well as the strategic overview required to drive improvement. Your teaching and support staff are a committed team and work together well to ensure the school is a harmonious and productive place to be.

It became clear to me from early on in my visit that the family ethos of the school is very strong. Parents love the nurturing culture their children enjoy. Some bring their children long distances to attend. Others talked of their parents and grandparents having attended the school. One parent told me, 'We're just happy our children have a place in this wonderful school.' All were overwhelmingly positive.

Pupils enjoy coming to school. The mixed-year classrooms are busy places and staff work hard to ensure that pupils of different ages and abilities engage well with their learning. Ensuring that pupils are challenged appropriately is a constant focus. This was particularly apparent in the mixed Reception and Year 1 class, where older pupils concentrated well as they completed a writing task, while younger children marked me 'present' on their register and told me proudly, 'We can write too!'

The school site has been developed sensitively yet sensibly in recent years, in order to provide pupils and staff with adequate facilities. Older pupils are excited about the 'mooga', their name for the very extensive newly built multi-use games area (MUGA). They took delight in explaining that they had at first called it the 'mugger', but thought that 'quite inappropriate' for such a caring school.

Concerns about site safety and the perimeter fencing have been addressed, although you and many parents are still very worried about passing traffic on the road outside the school. Sensible steps are being taken by governors to ensure that the perceived dangers are dealt with as soon as is reasonably possible.

Pupils make good progress in this school. Their achievements at different stages, from the Early Years Foundation Stage through to the end of Year 6, are generally better than those seen nationally. This has not always been the case, but with some cohort numbers in single figures, making comparisons is neither valid nor sensible.

The behaviour I witnessed in and around the school was never less than exemplary. Staff know the pupils very well. The academic and pastoral development of each child are given equal importance. During my formal discussion with a group of pupils, they found it hard to think of what could be improved in the school. Asked if there was something that they would change to make the school better, one Year 6 pupil offered that her legacy might be bigger dinner plates, but that things had been pretty good during her seven years at the school.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors recognised the many strengths of the school, including accurate self-evaluation, good levels of care, guidance and support for pupils, and excellent behaviour. They also identified a need to improve pupils' investigative skills in mathematics and the school's promotion of community cohesion. Leaders have addressed these matters effectively so that:

- the teaching of mathematics meets the requirements of the new National Curriculum, developing pupils' investigative skills in a number of ways, including opportunities to develop their reasoning skills and solve sophisticated problems
- pupils' sense of community, including the wider global community, is developed well through the curriculum and links with children in other parts of the world.

Since the last inspection, school leaders have continued the important process of self-evaluation in order to identify the key priorities to improve the school. You were able to explain clearly the many strengths of the school, as well as areas that still need to be developed. We agreed that pupils will make even better progress if teachers always ensure that they fully understand what they are learning, and why. We also agreed that because of recent changes in the leadership and membership of the governing body, opportunities for developing and training governors should be sought, so that the governing body becomes as effective as possible in helping to

make this an outstanding school. Helpfully, the local authority has offered support with this.

Safeguarding is effective.

The safety of pupils is afforded high importance. The safety of the school site has been a focus during recent times and a lot of work has gone into ensuring that pupils and staff are safe both inside and outside the school buildings. Parents told me they feel their children are safe at school. Pupils also told me they feel safe and have a good awareness of the potential dangers of using the internet and social media.

Leaders have ensured that child protection and safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Ongoing issues with the single central record, due to records being corrupted by a virus, were resolved during my visit. Training of staff and governors is up to date. Training for new governors has been arranged.

Inspection findings

- You lead with great confidence and by example, providing strong and effective support and challenge for staff and pupils alike. The senior teachers appreciate the trust and authority you put in them. Because of this, middle leadership is strong in this small school.
- Governors are keen to play their part in moving things forward. Recent changes in the membership of the governing body have been handled well, although there remains a need to ensure that new members are fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to hold school leaders more effectively to account for school improvement.
- Children do well in the early years. Because of the low numbers and good teaching, the needs of individual children are catered for well. Expectation is high. An ever-growing number of children end their Reception year well equipped for a seamless move into Year 1. Pupils in Year 1 also do well. Staff ensure that the mixed-year Reception and Year 1 class grouping does not hinder their progress.
- The school's phonics provision has improved year on year. Nearly all pupils reach the expected standard during Year 1. Those that do not, catch up in Year 2. Last year, no pupils entered Year 3 without reaching the expected standard.
- Outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics are above national averages by the time pupils finish Year 2, although because of very small numbers in year groups, care has to be taken when comparing this school to national benchmarks. What is clear is that individual pupils do well from their different starting points.
- Because of the quality of teaching, pupils continue to make good progress in Key Stage 2. This is particularly the case with reading and writing. High mobility (pupils leaving and joining the school at times during the year), as well as small

cohort numbers, make comparisons to national averages for pupil progress and achievement unwise.

- Sometimes, teachers do not ensure that pupils understand fully enough what they are learning, and why. Because of this, opportunities for pupils to fully exploit links in their learning are lost. This aspect of classroom practice will be a focus going forward.
- This is a happy school. Pupils' social and emotional needs are met well. A strong Christian ethos pervades the school, with a respectful, nurturing culture being very evident. The culture of 'one family' was clear to me from the moment I arrived. Older pupils are particularly diligent when ensuring that their younger peers feel safe and secure in what they are doing, both in and out of the classroom.
- Because of very low numbers, reporting on the progress of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those who are disabled or have special educational needs, is not possible. However, the school tracks the progress of individual pupils well, ensuring that those few pupils who are identified as in danger of falling behind are supported well.
- The behaviour of pupils was exemplary during the inspection. Because of the quality of teaching, attitudes to learning are very well developed. Pupils enjoy coming to school. Absence has fallen year on year and is now well below that seen nationally.
- Parents are very supportive of the school. They feel their children are safe and make very good progress. All of the parents who replied to the online Ofsted questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend the school to other parents.
- The role of the local authority has been of a 'light-touch' nature recently, although support for the school since the last inspection has ensured that it continues to be good. The local authority's agreement to support the governing body to develop more fully in coming months is welcome and will help ensure that the school continues to improve.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- teachers always focus pupils more closely on what they are learning, and why, rather than what they are doing. This will help pupils to make better connections, and make the better progress required for their outcomes to become outstanding
- the governing body fully develops its capacity to become as effective as possible, in order to support and challenge leaders to make this an outstanding school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for East Sussex County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Clive Close

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, middle leaders, support staff, pupils and the Chair of the Governing Body, who was accompanied by two other governors. I also spoke to a representative of the local authority on the telephone. You accompanied me on a learning walk during which we visited every class to view teaching and learning, taking opportunities to talk to pupils about their learning and look at the quality of their work. I observed pupils' behaviour in and around the school. I also attended an assembly. I spoke to a number of parents at the beginning of the day and took into account the 52 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I analysed a wide range of school documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, the school's own evaluation of its performance, the school development plan, minutes of governors' meetings, records of visits by the local authority, safeguarding checks, policies and procedures.