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Louise Gurney
Headteacher
Debden Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School
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Dear Ms Gurney

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Debden Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 4 May 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection that took place in May 2015. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Chris Moodie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2015.

- As a matter of great urgency ensure that all processes and procedures for safeguarding pupils are effective and meet statutory requirements.
- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - improvement plans have sharp, time-limited targets, based on accurate self-evaluation and a rigorous focus on raising pupils' achievement
 - teachers have a clear understanding of what good progress looks like in all subjects and set pupils learning targets that are sufficiently challenging
 - subject leaders and the deputy headteacher have sufficient time to monitor and evaluate the quality of learning and progress in their subjects and areas of responsibility across the school
 - the headteacher effectively supports leadership of the Early Years Foundation Stage
 - governors are vigilant in checking that all their statutory duties, including ensuring the school website fully complies with government requirements, are met.
- Raise pupils' achievement in writing so that it is consistently good in all subjects by ensuring that teachers:
 - plan interesting writing tasks that challenge and encourage pupils of all levels of ability to do their best
 - have high expectations for the quality of presentation of all pupils' written work
 - make sure the handwriting in all their marking is a model for pupils to follow
 - give pupils sufficient time to reflect on their work before handing it to the teacher to mark
 - give pupils sufficient time to improve work based on written and verbal feedback.
- Ensure that assessment at the start and end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is an accurate evaluation of children's knowledge, skills and understanding.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 4 May 2016

Evidence

I met with the headteacher, three members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. I evaluated the school's safeguarding procedures, including documentation and an inspection of the physical environment. I visited all classrooms with the headteacher, where I looked at pupils' work and observed short periods of teaching. I evaluated the school's work to monitor the quality of teaching and its improvement plans.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection of the school a new headteacher took up post in January 2016. The school has appointed a permanent deputy headteacher, who will start work in September 2016. A site manager has also been appointed very recently. A teacher is about to begin a maternity leave and the arrangement of classes has been altered to accommodate this. School leaders are at an early stage of discussing academy conversion.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The school's work to improve safeguarding procedures has been effective. As a result, the school is a safer place than it was at the time of the previous monitoring inspection. An inspection of the school site, both internal and external, showed an improved environment, with much less clutter in corridors and shared areas. Doors housing cleaning materials were locked and a heightened sense of awareness about safety was apparent. The school's safeguarding procedures with respect to recruitment and background checks meet requirements. Effective child protection training and procedures are in place.

The headteacher shoulders too many of the school's leadership responsibilities. The leadership of subjects is undeveloped and too many teachers, some with substantial experience, are at an early stage of understanding how to make a broader contribution to the school's work. As a result, the headteacher is over-reliant on external support to carry out the key functions of the leadership team. The headteacher has quickly established a routine of visiting lessons for brief periods on a regular basis to ensure that she has a good grasp of how well things are going. Teachers receive feedback about these visits and it is made clear if specific aspects of their work need more development. At present, the evaluation of pupils' work does not contribute sufficiently to this monitoring work.

Writing remains a weakness in some classes. In these classes, it is still too easy to identify which pupils are boys and which are girls purely on the basis of the quality of presentation and handwriting. This is not universal and, where teachers'

expectations of pupils are high regardless of their gender, there is little discernible difference in quality and care. Pupils are making very good progress in their writing, for example, in years 3 and 4 because the work that they are given is both stimulating and carefully assessed. This means that pupils know what they need to do next in order to improve.

The school's assessment information indicates that a significant proportion of pupils are not working above age-related expectations in reading, writing and mathematics in most year groups. The recently introduced assessment system is carefully monitored by leaders to ensure that information is accurate. Errors in the past have lowered expectations of what can be achieved. A striking example of this is to be found in year 1. Only half of these pupils entered the current year with a good level of development. This proportion is considerably below the national average. As a result of effective teaching these pupils are now thriving and have made strong progress. Many of them have now caught up and are exceeding age-related expectations. The school confidently expects an above-average proportion of them to meet the standards required in the phonics screening check.

Governors work effectively in partnership with the strategic intervention board. They are now much more active in monitoring the school's work and attend learning walks and book scrutinies. Governors undertook a safeguarding and health and safety audit in the early part of the spring term. The findings contributed to the ongoing improvement in this aspect of the school's work.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The quality of the early years provision has improved significantly since the inspection in May 2015. Assessment is accurate and has been moderated by the local authority. The outdoor environment is increasingly well used and stimulating for children.
- The headteacher has gained a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the school. Her monitoring of teaching is rigorous in that it identifies precisely what teachers need to improve.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The coverage of the full national curriculum is inconsistent. In some classes, there is too little evidence of science work. In those classes where science work has been done regularly, teachers rely too heavily on worksheets rather than developing important investigative skills. In addition, very little evidence of geography work was in evidence. In planned topics that are focused on geographical themes, the coverage of geography is limited.
- Pupils are not realising their potential because some teachers have low expectations of what they can achieve. Pupils in year 6 have made too little progress in writing this year given their starting points. The standard of work produced at the beginning of the academic year and that which is being produced now is not markedly different for many pupils.

External support

The local authority has continued to provide effective support for the school and conducted an external review in the spring term to assess progress. In addition, local authority officers are well represented on the strategic intervention board and are monitoring the implementation of the improvement plan, supporting the governing body and holding the headteacher to account. The two coaching headteachers who led the school during the autumn term have maintained contact and support for the school and have made a valuable contribution to its sustained improvement.