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Mrs Sue Rolfe
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Dear Mrs Rolfe

Short inspection of St Andrew's CofE VC Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 4 May 2016, accompanied by Paul Brooker HMI, 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 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The opening of the east site, which it is proposed will double the school in size, has brought challenges and benefits in equal measures for leaders at all levels. Importantly, you and the governors have not allowed this to distract you from your prime responsibility. You have continued to ensure that, on both sites, good teaching results in most pupils making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. This has been achieved even though not all leadership posts are currently filled. Secure arrangements are in place to appoint a second deputy from September 2016. Even so, you have not yet finalised a strategic long-term plan with governors for the further expansion of the leadership team as pupil numbers and staffing continue to rise rapidly.

Discussions with some Year 4 pupils assured me that their teachers encourage them to challenge themselves and have high expectations for them to work hard. Observations of teaching and learning confirmed that this is the case in most classes. Staff and governors share ambition for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability, to enjoy learning and achieve well, and most of them do. You have successfully addressed the points for improvement given in the previous inspection report. Learning now proceeds at a brisk pace, pupils of all abilities tackle work at the right level of difficulty and they show resilience and independence in their learning.

Following a decline in the attainment of Reception and Year 1 pupils in 2014,

leaders took action quickly making significant changes to raise standards. Targets set for all pupils' attainment in the current school development plan are higher and more ambitious than before. As a consequence, most of the current Year 1 and Year 2 pupils are making up for previously lost ground. The most-able pupils make good progress because they are given work that challenges and stretches them. Separate targets for the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability do not feature in the plan, despite this being a priority. However, they do in the annual appraisal of each teacher's performance. The plan does not focus sharply enough on the progress and achievement of different groups.

The early years leader has totally restructured approaches and provision for learning in the Reception classes to improve children's rates of progress. Planning now takes into account the developmental needs of individual children as well as what they are interested in and want to explore. Adults use questioning well to move children on in their learning and to engage them in conversation. Disadvantaged children and those who have special educational needs or disability receive good-quality additional individual teaching to accelerate their early reading, writing and number skills. There is a buzz of excitement in the early years classes as children eagerly go about the business of learning. Children's personal and social skills are developing well. This was an area of learning that was previously less well developed and is now a strength. Children are making much better progress, with more on track to reach a good level of development by the end of the school year.

The literacy leaders have successfully changed the way phonics (letters and the sounds that they make) is taught. They check that phonics is taught daily in short, lively sessions that help pupils to progress and develop skills in reading, writing and spelling. This has made a difference, as seen in pupils' written work. The special educational needs and disability coordinator (SENDCo) carefully tracks the progress of pupils who have special educational needs or more complex speech and language difficulties. Their targets are reviewed regularly with class teachers and parents. Additional specialist support is brought in quickly if targets are missed. This ensures that pupils who benefit from the specially resourced provision for speech and language, and others with special educational needs, make good progress.

All staff have been involved in devising a new system for assessment to check that pupils are learning all that they should in the new national curriculum and to identify what they need to learn next. This work is rightly a priority for the school in its development plan. Currently reams of data are collected to demonstrate the progress that different groups are making, but the information is not presented in a way that is easy to interpret at a glance.

The newly constituted governing body is well led. Governors know what information they want to see and have requested changes in the way data is presented. They want to be better placed to check that priorities set in the development plan are on track to be achieved. They hold you to account. It is not as straightforward for governors to question leaders about progress made against each action in the development plan because it is not clear who is responsible.

You know, through your accurate evaluation of all aspects of the school's work, what makes St Andrew's a good school and where there is work to do to make it even better. Under your proficient leadership, coupled with strong governance, the school is in safe hands to continue to make improvements, despite the challenges posed by developing the new site and coping with unforeseen staffing problems. Parents and staff are generally positive about the school. However, responses in Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire) and the staff questionnaire reflect some of the difficulties the school has faced during its expansion and in addressing high turnover of staff in one Year 1 class. Nonetheless, you and governors do not dodge your responsibility to keep staff and parents informed of your plans.

Safeguarding is effective.

The culture for shared responsibility to safeguard pupils is strong and safeguarding is a suitably high priority for all staff and governors. Statutory checks for suitability of staff during the recruitment process are thorough and recorded accurately on the single central record. This enables leaders and governors to check that they are all completed before new staff take up their posts. Risk assessment for school visits and journeys takes into account potential hazards when pupils are away from the school site and ensures the right levels of supervision. The early years leader has undertaken a general risk assessment of provision in the Reception classes. A daily spot check is not in place to assess potential risks for planned activities that change regularly. Pupils with significant emotional or behavioural needs have access to the nurture class during the school day that is staffed by the special educational needs or disability team as needed. It provides pupils with time out of class for short periods to calm themselves or recover, and extra provision to develop their confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being. This reduces the impact of individual pupils' behaviour on others' learning. All staff and governors are trained to the right level in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. As the lead professional for safeguarding, you take immediate action to address any concerns raised by staff about potentially vulnerable pupils. You have a good track record of intervening successfully and working with parents to avoid escalation to the child protection register or early help assessment. Even so, where necessary, referrals to external health and social services are made quickly and confidently.

Inspection findings

- Attainment on entry to Reception is measured accurately in each area of learning. Children's development is generally in line with or just below expectations for four-year-olds. Judgements are checked within the staff team, with other local schools and with the local authority. Children's personal, social and emotional development is usually lower than other areas of learning on entry.
- In 2014, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year dipped to an unprecedented low point. Their achievement in personal, social and emotional development; physical development; communication and language; mathematics and literacy were underdeveloped, which is why so many failed to achieve a good level of development.

- Swift action taken by senior leaders and the early years leaders to change provision and raise expectations resulted in considerable recovery in 2015. Current children are making good progress from their starting points towards the early learning goals. They are confident, enthusiastic learners who develop secure relationships with adults and cooperate with one another.
- Pupils in key stages 1 and 2 achieve well.
- The new national curriculum prompted teachers to re-evaluate what all pupils in each year group are expected to know and do by the end of the year. This has contributed to their higher expectations. Since its introduction, curriculum planning and arrangements for assessment have had to change. Staff are trying out different ways to develop a reliable assessment system in consultation with other local lower and middle schools. Gaps in pupils' knowledge have been identified and teaching planned to address them.
- Extra programmes are taught to all disadvantaged pupils and evaluated to ensure that they are making a difference, achieving value for money and are narrowing gaps in progress and attainment.
- Governors are checking the progress of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability diligently and holding you accountable for pupils' achievement. Governors interrogate information systematically so that they can ask questions to challenge you.
- The deputy headteacher leads on pupil premium provision and keeps a close eye on the progress eligible pupils are making. Also, a named governor is responsible for monitoring this aspect of the school's work to check that the additional funding is making a difference.
- Leaders and governors are acutely aware of the link between regular attendance and good achievement. Pupils are encouraged to attend regularly and rewarded for good attendance with certificates. Attendance for the very large majority of pupils is above average. Steps have been taken to address the absenteeism of a few disadvantaged pupils and those with an education, health and care plan or statement of special educational needs. Solutions have been found, such as support and input from the family worker. These are leading to better attendance for these pupils.
- Documentation for safeguarding pupils is thorough and the policy is implemented consistently. You and the chair of the governing body ensure that there are no omissions on the single central record of statutory checks made on staff during the recruitment process.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they are more incisive in the analysis and reporting of assessment information, and in the planning for future improvement
- they finalise a strategic plan for the future expansion of the leadership team that is sustainable and specifies roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the diocese of St Albans, and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- The inspection was quality assured by a senior HMI, reflecting Ofsted's robust regular checks on all inspection activity.
- Inspectors gathered a wide range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This included: short observations of lessons, jointly with you or the deputy headteacher in all classes on both sites; scrutiny of pupils' current written work; and discussions with leaders.
- Inspectors talked to a wide range of pupils informally in classrooms and all of the Year 4 pupils on the east site met with an inspector as a group.
- Meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, the early years and key stage 1 leaders, the SENDCo and five governors including the chair.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documentation including information about the school's self-evaluation and plans for future improvement.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined, including mandatory checks made during the recruitment of new staff and risk assessments undertaken for educational visits.
- The view of 77 parents who responded to Parent View were taken into account, as well as responses of 43 staff completing the online staff questionnaire.