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Consultant headteachers  
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Dear Mr Tomasetti and Mr Cheetham

### **Short inspection of St Michael's Church of England Primary School**

Following my visit to the 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. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in December 2011.

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

Since joining the school in January 2016 you have brought much-needed stability following a period of turbulence in leadership at the school and a decline in standards in some areas of learning. You are ably supported by the head of school, who is also the Year 5 and Year 6 teacher, who led the school for a short period prior to your arrival. In a short space of time you have instilled confidence in both staff and parents to support school improvement because you visibly uphold your own high expectations of others.

Parents have been justifiably concerned about the frequent changes in leadership. However, they are confident that the school is improving because you have a clear sense of direction and high levels of ambition for each child. A parent has reflected the views of many by saying, 'With the new consultant heads in place, we seem to be heading into a more secure happy future.' A number of parents noted their pride that their children are part of your school and have recognised the hard work and dedication of staff while the school has undergone significant changes in leadership and governance. You have ensured that pupils are nurtured and safe, while promoting high expectations of academic performance. You have been resolute in your determination to raise standards. Because of this, you have quickly improved the quality of teaching across the school and pupils are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics as a result. Consequently, leaders have recovered

the good quality of education evident in the school at the time of the last inspection. This in turn has had a positive impact on the progress that pupils are making, which is helping more pupils to reach the expected standards for their age.

Pupils enter the school with knowledge, skills and understanding that are broadly typical for children of their age. Progress during the early years is good. The proportion of children reaching the level of achievement that is typical for their age by the end of Reception has risen dramatically over the last three years. Now, more pupils achieve a good level of development than the national average and approximately a quarter of children exceed this expectation. Historically, this positive start has not been built upon because the quality of teaching in key stage 1 has not been good enough. Subsequently, fewer pupils have achieved the standards expected of them by the end of key stage 1 in reading and writing than should be expected.

Since 2014 the local authority has taken action to improve standards at the school, including providing additional training, allocating funding and facilitating external support. They have ensured that school improvement has been overseen by a highly experienced and strategic interim executive board which has been effective in holding leaders to account and secured good teaching and leadership. As a result pupils are making at least expected progress from their starting points and many pupils now make rapid progress to overcome past underachievement. Attainment, especially in writing, is improving at a fast pace. Staff use assessment information well to ensure that learning activities are well matched to the needs of pupils, including pupils who are disadvantaged and the most-able pupils.

You know the school's strengths and areas for development extremely well and have lost no time in trying to address areas for improvement. You now have a positive staff team who are single-minded in their drive to provide a higher standard of education for pupils. For example, your focus on using information about how well pupils are doing to ensure that learning is pitched to challenge all pupils has resulted in rapid improvement in pupils' writing across the school, including in early years. Pupils' understanding and ability to apply mathematics to reason and problem solve has also improved rapidly. Pupils say that there are always more challenging activities and tasks for them to do, and so work is never too easy.

You have rightly focused on improving outcomes in pupils' early reading skills. You know that the number of pupils who achieved the expected standard in phonics (letters and the sounds that they make) by the end of Year 1 in 2015 was too low. The intervention of the local authority and interim executive board to secure good teaching, allocate additional training for early years and key stage 1 teachers, and provide additional support for pupils from January 2015, did have a positive effect on outcomes. You have rightly continued to support pupils who did not reach the expected standard last year. As a result, 90% of pupils in Year 2 have now secured the necessary skills to be confident early readers and so the deficit has been eradicated. Additional support provided by the school to enhance pupils' early reading skills has continued. This is also helping pupils who are currently in Year 1 to catch up and overcome the legacy of underachievement which has resulted from

poor teaching in the past. Phonics is now taught well in early years and key stage 1. Consequently, pupils are able to apply what they know to read with fluency and spell with increasing accuracy. This in turn has impacted positively on the progress pupils are making in their writing.

You and your staff have worked dutifully to meet the recommendations from the previous inspection, which required the school to raise pupils' attainment in writing to the highest levels and provide greater opportunities and challenge for the most-able pupils. Because the quality of teaching has improved to be consistently strong in all key stages, learning is well matched to the needs of pupils. Pupils are increasingly building on what they already know and can do to rapidly improve their attainment in writing. Subsequently, more pupils are working at the standard expected for their age. The achievement in writing at the end of key stage 2 in 2015 is particularly noteworthy. Year 6 pupils attained more highly than the national average in writing. All pupils made at least expected progress throughout key stage 2 and all pupils achieved the standard expected for their age. In addition, half of the pupils reached the highest levels of attainment in writing.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

School leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. There is a strong emphasis on well-being throughout the school's work, underpinned by supportive and caring relationships between staff and pupils, and between pupils. Parents value the care their children receive. One parent summarised the feelings of many by saying, 'The school has a lovely community feel to it and nurtures a safe, caring and respectful environment for the children.'

Thorough checks are made on staff and other adults when they work or volunteer at the school. All staff are trained in child protection procedures, including in areas pertinent to protecting pupils from radicalisation. Nearly all parents feel that their children are cared for and safe, and, as a result, are happy in school. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe. For example, they practise evacuating the school building in the event of a fire. Those responsible for governance support and strengthen safeguarding procedures by monitoring the school's work and by completing an annual audit of safeguarding procedures.

### **Inspection findings**

- Pupils have exemplary attitudes to learning and demonstrate high expectations of themselves. They are resilient and persevere even when work is tricky. They engage with adults confidently and participate enthusiastically in discussions. These highly commendable qualities have helped pupils to make strong progress and prepare them well for the next stage of their education and life outside of school. One parent shared their views by saying, 'My son has developed a love of learning by attending this school and getting so much support and encouragement.'

- Pupils are polite and welcoming. They behave well. There are very few incidents of poor behaviour and fixed-term exclusions are exceptionally rare. The oldest pupils act as tremendous role models to younger pupils. One parent summarised the views of many by stating, 'I have been impressed by every aspect of the school, especially the manners they instil in their children – all of whom seem completely happy and totally at ease in their environment.'
- The effectiveness of leadership has been strengthened because responsibilities for steering subjects and areas for improvement are now shared with middle leaders. The acting head of school, who is responsible for the school when you are not on-site, has provided much-needed consistency and support during recent times and acts as a role model for others.
- You and other leaders have ambitious expectations for pupils' outcomes. These take account of the fact that the standards expected by the end of each academic year have risen. You have made a speedy response by developing an assessment system that tracks the progress and achievement of pupils against the new curriculum. Staff are using this to plan lessons that meet the needs of pupils. The vast majority of pupils are making at least good progress as a result in reading, writing and mathematics. Still more work needs to be done to make certain that more pupils are working at the standard expected for their age in all subjects, especially in writing.
- Leaders are committed to equality and have instilled high expectations among all staff for the progress and achievement of disadvantaged pupils. The number of disadvantaged pupils in the school is well below the national average and there are no disadvantaged pupils in some classes. This makes it difficult to compare the outcomes for this group of pupils over time. Disadvantaged pupils are making progress that is broadly in line with peers in reading and mathematics. Their progress in writing is greater than that of their peers. The impact of additional government funding is analysed thoroughly to make sure that interventions are making a difference.
- The most-able pupils are challenged because work is closely matched to their needs. Their learning is tailored to help them think more deeply and apply what they know in a range of ways. Work in books and observations in lessons evidence the good progress they make in reading, writing and mathematics. For instance, the most-able pupils write at length and use a range of complex sentences enhanced by rich vocabulary and precise punctuation. As illustration, an older pupil was observed writing, 'Hurdling over the maggot infested log, the worn out boys waited inside the un-turfed trunk. It was warm and damp, low and cramped.'
- There have been significant improvements to the overall quality of provision in early years. There is a greater emphasis on children leading their own learning because the environment is well structured to allow them to do so. Children are engaged and motivated in all areas of learning. For instance, during this visit, children built a den together complete with a pretend campfire. A large number of buggies and tricycles were available outdoors to strengthen gross motor skills and children's physical development. Children chose to write and were proud of their writing, keenly sharing their

work with the inspector, on this occasion accurately labelling farmyard animals. They were effective communicators and were able to explain clearly what they were doing and why. Children are proud of their school and play nicely together. There is still more work to do to make sure that the outdoor environment encourages the same level of mathematical and language-rich opportunities as the indoor environment. Nonetheless, children receive a very good start to their education and are well prepared for Year 1.

- Pupils are now taught phonics effectively and imaginatively and consequently enjoy their learning. Pupils practise contractions in Year 1, such as 'didn't' and 'don't'. Pupils are able to read and spell increasingly difficult words, such as 'pterodactyl', and use new words in sentences. For example, children in early years practised the 'oa' diagraph (two letters that make one sound) by independently writing 'boatman' and 'coated' into a sentence. Pupils read confidently and with expression, because they are able to blend and segment words quickly. The number of pupils who will reach the expected standard in the phonics screening test in Year 1 is predicted to rise significantly towards the national average in 2016 following unacceptably low standards in 2015. Leaders are determined to continue to improve achievement in phonics.
- Work in books shows the wide range of vocabulary used by pupils in their writing. Pupils have secure grammatical knowledge and their spelling is quickly improving. The progress that pupils are making is tangible because writing is taught consistently well. Pupils feel that feedback from teachers has helped them identify how to make their writing even better. You know that this remains an essential area for improvement, and therefore plan to provide pupils with opportunities to immerse themselves in language and writing across the curriculum.
- Pupils' books show that they can respond to mathematical challenges and use a range of strategies to solve problems. Pupils have opportunities to practise and deepen their understanding in a wide variety of ways. In a key stage 2 lesson pupils grappled with multiplying fractions, and Year 1 and Year 2 pupils learned to divide using arrays and number lines. The most-able pupils understood that division is the inverse of multiplication and used this to help them divide. Pupils in all key stages are making strong progress in mathematics. This is because learning is matched well to pupils' ability and teaching enables them to build on what they already know. Historically, a higher proportion of pupils have achieved the expected outcomes in mathematics than in reading and writing.
- Leaders have worked hard to increase the proportion of pupils who attend school every day and attendance is improving. Prior to the Christmas holiday, attendance had risen to above the national average for primary schools. This is a heartening starting point for the school to build upon. However, despite this pleasing start to the school year, an outbreak of the Influenza A virus just before Easter has depleted this promising start. As a result, attendance remains obstinately below the national average.
- Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school. Some have, fairly, expressed concerns about the changes in leadership during the recent past

and the uncertainty this affords. One parent captures this by saying, 'It needs consistent long-term leadership, having had five temporary leaders since September 2014.' Nevertheless, parents are glowing about the way in which staff have dealt with changes, their dedication and the ongoing care the school provides for their children. One parent described the school as being 'like a gem in a sea of rocks'.

- The interim executive board, responsible for governance, adds to the capacity of the school to improve further. They diligently hold leaders to account for the progress the school is making and keep steadfastly focused on school improvement in the interest of the pupils. The interim executive board is led by a highly experienced chair; underpinned by members that offer a wealth of vital skills to contribute to the school. They provide challenge and support because they clearly understand the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have taken necessary action to improve the quality of teaching and to strengthen leadership. Those responsible for governance are committed to the school and to the protection of children from harm.
- You have been open to support offered to the school and you say that this support has made a positive difference. The local authority have provided additional funding to improve the physical environment and school buildings, for example the reinstatement of a school hall and kitchen and building two new classrooms. They have provided expertise and training to help the school during changes of leadership. Due to their diligence and perseverance they have now secured highly effective leadership and stability. The relationship between the school and local authority is strong. In addition, you have particularly welcomed support and collaboration with other schools within the Rye Educational Improvement Partnership. Staff have been able to share pupils' work to make sure that their judgements about how well pupils are doing are secure.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- further improve the early years provision by ensuring that the outdoor environment is as stimulating and rich in language and mathematics as the indoor environment
- ensure that pupils continue to make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics to increase the proportion of pupils who are working at the level of achievement expected for their age
- continue to focus on improving pupils' early reading skills so that more pupils reach the standard expected of them by the end of Year 1.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the executive board, the director of education for the diocese of Chichester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Abigail Birch

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

I met with you, the special educational needs coordinator, the early years teacher, those responsible for safeguarding, the English lead who also teaches in Year 3 and Year 4, and the acting head of school who also teaches Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. We visited all classes together. I spoke to pupils in lessons and heard pupils read. I looked at their English books with staff and viewed pupils' work during lessons. I took account of the 34 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 32 written contributions by parents, which were also made online. I also took account of two letters given to me by parents during the inspection. I spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day. No responses had been made by staff to the online staff questionnaire. I analysed a range of the school's documentation, including information about school improvement, pupils' achievement, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. I also looked at and discussed with you the evaluation of the school's effectiveness.