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Mr Stewart Caplen
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Dear Mr Caplen

Short inspection of Cressing Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 December 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 September 2011.

This school continues to be good.

School leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your head of school have used your complementary skills well, during a period of staffing uncertainty, to maintain your vision 'to develop each child's full potential – intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally'. Pupils told me how much they enjoy school and relish the opportunities to 'learn together'. All parents who responded on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend the school to another parent.

Pupils, parents and staff explained to me how much they value your clear, approachable leadership. Staff understand, and respond well to, your expectation that every pupil should be challenged to achieve their very best, academically and socially. You establish precisely what pupils know and can achieve when they enter the school and then track their progress carefully, in particular in English and mathematics. You and your team use this information to amend the curriculum and offer support should pupils fall behind. For example, the leader of the early years accurately assesses that children enter the school with a broad range of skills and abilities. She uses this information well to develop a creative, exciting curriculum that enables children to make good progress from their varying, and in some cases low, individual starting points.

Pupils behave well at Cressing Primary School. Teachers have high expectations of how pupils should behave and lessons are characterised by supportive, good-humoured relationships. As a result, pupils develop the confidence to attempt increasingly challenging learning activities. You also take every opportunity to develop pupils' thinking and literacy skills in lessons and assemblies. For example, pupils demonstrate their reflective approach to learning in their thoughtful written responses to thinking challenges you set in assemblies: 'Will tomorrow be shorter than today?' and 'I give all my heart'.

You are rightly proud of the level of care and support that you provide for pupils, especially for those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable. Parents explained the lengths the school goes to in ensuring that pupils are well cared for. One parent told me that you 'could not have done more' to ensure that their child settled into school. Pupils' achievements are recognised and celebrated on a regular basis. Consequently, pupils develop into increasingly confident, resilient learners who are proud of their school. Disadvantaged pupils make good progress in their time at Cressing Primary School.

Pupils have historically achieved well in the phonics screening check. Following on from a fall in outcomes last year, you swiftly commissioned an external audit. Using information from this audit, you quickly adjusted the approach to teaching phonics so that it matches pupils' increasingly diverse needs and capabilities more precisely. Inspection evidence demonstrates that pupils of all abilities enjoy, and achieve well in, phonics. This is due to the adults' clear enunciation, good subject knowledge and careful planning of learning. Pupils who read to me were able to apply the phonic skills and knowledge they have developed to read with confidence.

You have a good understanding of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. For example, you accurately judge that strong practice exists across key stage 1, where teachers typically design learning activities that interest and excite pupils. This was evident in a key stage 1 music lesson where, due to the teacher's skilful planning and delivery, pupils enthusiastically developed a clear understanding of rhythm and timing. Inspection evidence demonstrates that, across key stage 1, many pupils make good progress from their individual starting points across a range of subjects including English and mathematics.

Attainment at key stage 2 is high. In 2016, significantly higher proportions of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics than the national average. However, you were rightly disappointed with the progress that pupils, especially those of middle ability, made in mathematics. Your impressive leader of mathematics has taken steps to ensure that pupils develop greater confidence in, and a deeper understanding of, mathematics. As a consequence, many pupils are now making good progress from their individual starting points. However, the most able pupils still do not consistently make the same strong progress in mathematics as they do in English. This is because, at times, they are not given enough time to attempt more demanding work in some classes.

I identified the progress of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities as a line of enquiry for this inspection. These pupils and those who are vulnerable are well provided for. Their individual needs are swiftly and accurately established and appropriate support is put in place. Evidence from pupils' work and detailed tracking information demonstrates that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making good progress from their individual starting points across a range of subjects including English and mathematics.

After the previous inspection, pupils' attendance improved and the proportion of pupils who were regularly absent declined and was lower than the national average. However, in 2016, overall pupils' attendance fell. You and your leaders continue to take decisive action to rectify this by increasing monitoring and communicating even more clearly with parents. As a result, pupils' attendance is improving.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders, including governors, place the highest priority on keeping pupils safe and providing strong pastoral care for the pupils at Cressing Primary School. These leaders have been successful in their aim of creating 'a safe and caring environment in which members of the community feel confident and valued'. Pupils and parents told me how much they value the strong sense of togetherness that exists within the school.

Records, including the school's checks on adults' suitability to work with children, are carefully and accurately maintained.

Pupils are aware of different forms of bullying and the upset that bullying causes. They are clear that it is something that does not take place often at Cressing Primary School. Pupils also demonstrate confidence that adults would deal with bullying swiftly and appropriately, were it to occur. Parents, in their responses on Parent View, as well as in their comments on the day of inspection, were similarly positive that their children are safe in school.

Leaders ensure that pupils are equipped with strategies to enable them to act safely, for example when using the internet. Pupils explained to me that through lessons and specially arranged talks on topics such as fire and road safety, they understand how to keep themselves safe in different situations.

School leaders keep careful records of actions taken when they have concerns about the well-being of a child. These securely held records show that leaders take appropriate actions to care for vulnerable children.

Adults are appropriately trained in relevant aspects of safeguarding, including that relating to the government's 'Prevent' duty. Staff understand their professional responsibilities laid out in the school's code of conduct. As a result, adults are alert to their safeguarding duties and know what action to take if they have concerns about the well-being of any child.

Inspection findings

- Since the previous inspection, there have been several staffing changes at Cressing Primary School. When, two years ago, you took on the role of executive headteacher across two schools, a head of school took over the day-to-day running of the school. During the head of school's planned absence, other colleagues shared leadership duties. Four teachers have left the school and three have arrived. In an area where it is difficult to recruit, you have refused to deviate from your view that you will only appoint the most appropriately skilled and qualified teachers. You have, therefore, ensured that there has been a continuity of leadership and good-quality teaching, learning and assessment.
- Inspection evidence demonstrates that the governing body has an accurate understanding of the quality of education provided by the school. Governors monitor the school's work carefully. For example, through the activities of a knowledgeable governor, the governing body has a clear understanding of the school's provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Governors use this information, along with that gathered from their visits to school, to support and challenge school leaders well.
- You monitor the progress that pupils make in English and mathematics frequently and carefully. You use this information well to provide additional support for pupils who need extra help in their work. For example, you are successfully improving pupils' outcomes by providing extra reading sessions, or master classes in mathematics. You have plans to apply the same forensic approach to using information about the progress that pupils make across other subjects, as you know that this is not currently done to the same high standard.
- Middle leaders are increasingly effective in their work. They make appropriate amendments to the school curriculum where standards need to improve. As a result of adjustments made to the curriculum, many pupils demonstrate a deeper understanding of mathematics and are making good progress. Similarly, in response to the findings of the previous inspection report, leaders successfully placed greater emphasis on developing pupils' writing skills. As a result, pupils make good progress in their writing at each key stage.
- Due to the small numbers in each year group, it is difficult to draw robust comparisons with national averages. However, you recognised that you needed to amend the school's approach to phonics to reflect the increasingly diverse needs of pupils. This is already reaping rewards. I observed two groups of pupils enthusiastically learning their sounds and letters. These skills are taught well and pupils now make good progress in phonics.

- The school's curriculum affords pupils plentiful opportunities to learn well across a range of subjects. Pupils told me how much they enjoyed learning about William Morris and Claude Monet in art, carrying out experiments in science and taking part in the school's Victorian day which helped them understand how people used to live. However, the most able pupils are not given the chance to demonstrate their capabilities as frequently as they should. For example, in science, these pupils are limited in the depth of analysis they can provide due to the way that learning activities are designed. You have rightly identified the achievement of the most able pupils as a priority for the school.
- Pupils know that their achievements are recognised at Cressing Primary School. They want to be the 'stars of the week' and are proud to be a member of the '98 club' (for those pupils whose attendance is over 98%). Pupils are enthusiastic participants in the school's house competitions, and excitedly informed me that the 'Normans' and 'Romans' are currently battling it out for the honour of 'best house'. This vibrant rewards culture is helping to generate a 'can do' approach to learning among pupils.
- In 2016, overall attendance fell and the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent rose. Through your home-school attendance officer, you have taken action to improve the attendance of those pupils who attend less regularly. You can demonstrate that, along with the head of school's daily calls to parents, home visits and parent interviews, this is having a positive impact and these pupils' attendance is rising. However, you recognise that more work needs to be done to ensure that their attendance is as high as it should be.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the work to improve the attendance of the small number of pupils who do not attend as often as they should continues
- leaders, including middle leaders, apply the same precise approach used when monitoring pupils' progress in English and mathematics to the progress that pupils make in other subjects
- middle leaders sharpen their focus on the progress that the most able pupils make across a range of subjects, including mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

On this inspection I considered the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding procedures, how effectively leaders are improving the attendance of pupils, the quality of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and leaders' strategies for improving outcomes in phonics and across key stage 2.

I met with you, the head of school, other senior leaders, three middle leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, two governors, a representative from the local authority and a group of eight pupils. During two tours of the school, one with you and one with the head of school, I visited each class to observe pupils' learning. I also looked at pupils' work in their books and around the school. I analysed documentation relating to the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, the school's analysis of pupils' progress, attendance and behaviour, the school's safeguarding policy and practice, governance, and the use of pupil premium funding. I also took account of the views of parents who spoke with me over the course of the inspection as well as those of the 15 parents who responded to Parent View.