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Mrs Kelly Burlton
Headteacher
High Halden Church of England Primary School
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Dear Mrs Burlton

Short inspection of High Halden Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 17 January 2017, 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 January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

You and your colleagues have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. It is to your credit that you have achieved this despite the many changes in staffing and leadership that have happened over the last few years.

The inspector at the previous inspection highlighted strengths in teaching, leadership, behaviour, systems to help pupils catch up and relationships with parents and the community. These aspects remain strong. Parents and staff are fulsome in their praise of all aspects of the school. Staff are proud to be a part of the school and enjoy working here. The culture and ethos of the school are very positive and underpinned by strong, shared values. Relationships are warm and respectful.

At the previous inspection, the inspector recommended that the school should increase opportunities for pupils to write at length and for different purposes. He also highlighted outdoor learning in the early years as an area that needed to improve. Both aspects have been addressed effectively. Outcomes in writing have improved and there is evidence in pupils' books, particularly in key stage 2 books and around the school, of high-quality, engaging writing for a range of different purposes. The quality of provision in the Reception class, both inside and outside, is lively and exciting. The proportion of children achieving a good level of development has risen sharply to above the national average, for the past two years, so that

these children have moved into Year 1 well equipped for their next steps in education.

The inspector also recommended that there should be more challenge and opportunities to use and apply learning in mathematics. The strategies you adopted to tackle this seemed to be working well and, over time, pupils achieved well in mathematics. However, last year, there was a sharp fall in the proportion of Year 6 pupils who achieved the standard expected for their age. You, your staff and the governors acted swiftly to analyse and to address the reasons for this fall. The work in the pupils' books suggests that the current Year 6 are achieving at an appropriate level for their age. You have introduced regular activities to get them used to working more independently and at a faster rate.

You recognise the importance of looking outwards, sharing expertise and experiences with other schools. You work well with your local group of schools to drive improvement. For example, due to recent staff changes and difficulties in recruiting, key stage 1 pupils have made a rather hesitant start to this academic year. You have secured the secondment of an experienced teacher, from one of the other schools, to strengthen teaching for this age group and to enhance your school's mathematics expertise.

Safeguarding is effective.

The pupils feel safe, happy and well looked after in school. Their parents and the staff agree. The overwhelming majority of responses to the parent, staff and pupil online surveys, and the parents I spoke to at the start of the day, were highly positive. The staff know families and individual pupils very well indeed. You have introduced an effective key worker system for more vulnerable pupils and this has enriched the quality of communication between families and the school.

Safeguarding policies are clear, comprehensive and practical. There are secure systems for checking and recording the suitability of adults to work in the school. Staff training is up to date and appropriate. You and your assistant headteacher have undertaken the training for designated safeguarding leaders and the rest of the staff are also well trained in all aspects of safeguarding practice. Any concerns are carefully recorded, tracked and analysed.

Overall attendance is improving and fewer pupils take a lot of time off school. However, attendance remains a weakness despite the school's strenuous efforts. You have tried many strategies such as regularly contacting parents to remind them about the importance of attending school every day, and rewarding good attendance. Nonetheless, the attendance of a small group continues to be poor and erratic. As a result, some pupils are regularly missing odd days and this has a negative impact on the continuity of their learning.

Inspection findings

- I focused, in particular, on the following aspects during this inspection: attainment and progress in mathematics particularly in key stage 2; provision in

the early years foundation stage, especially outdoor learning; the effectiveness of the school's work to keep pupils safe and attendance; the impact of leaders, especially on school improvement, the culture and ethos of the school and behaviour.

- *The impact of leadership on school improvement, culture, ethos and behaviour*
The atmosphere around the school is positive, purposeful and friendly. Pupils are courteous, chatty and respectful towards adults and each other. They pay attention in lessons and try hard to achieve. There is a strong emphasis on the school's Christian values. These are displayed throughout the school and feature in worship assemblies. The corridors and classrooms are vibrant with a wide range of good-quality work across different subjects and show that the pupils enjoy a broad and rich curriculum. Pupils readily discussed their topic work and show a lively interest in learning new things.
- *Attainment and progress in mathematics particularly in key stage 2*
Pupils had been achieving well in mathematics, and attainment and progress had been rising, but the achievement of Year 6 pupils in mathematics last year dropped significantly. Pupils who were achieving well in class seemed to find the test conditions very difficult. Outcomes in key stage 1 and in Reception in mathematics were much more positive. Leaders, including governors, urgently analysed the causes of the poor outcomes and have brought in external expertise, enabled whole staff training, provided parent workshops and sharpened the assessment of mathematics through the year and across the school. There is better use of resources to support pupils' learning, regular opportunities for pupils to work in 'test' conditions and a greater emphasis on reasoning and challenge in most lessons. The books and school's tracking suggest that pupils are now making at least reasonable and often good progress. The oldest pupils are making the most rapid progress.
- *The quality of writing*
Pupils' writing skills are improving over time and pupils in Year 6 last year made good progress in writing. Good progress during this academic year, both in terms of quality and quantity, is evident, particularly among the oldest pupils. There are regular, interesting opportunities to write for different purposes and across different subjects. There are lovely examples of writing on display around the school including some beautiful, poetic imagery from older pupils and some interesting letters about the pros and cons of everlasting winter from younger ones. Some of the handwriting of both adults and pupils is rather untidy and common grammatical mistakes such as 'it were a lovely day' go unchecked. The early reading and writing sessions for younger pupils are well organised and run smoothly but the pace of learning in some sessions is a bit slow. Writing in Years 1 and 2 is not quite as good as it should be at this point in the year.
- *Provision in the early years foundation stage, especially outdoor learning*
The outdoor area is an exciting, stimulating learning environment. Children are involved in a wide range of activities. During the visit, many activities and resources promoted mathematical learning, including padlocks which could only be unlocked by using the correct combination of two numbers that together made 10. There are imaginative and well-organised, inviting activities which promote reading and writing, and help children learn about their environment.

Children enjoy practical activities to develop their fine motor skills. For example, one child was very excited about making (and eating) a sandwich. The early reading activities seen during the day were purposeful, with children working well together, enjoying and reading stories. Parents of Reception children were fulsome in their praise for the quality of the provision that their children are experiencing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- appropriate action is taken to improve attendance
- changes in the teaching and learning of mathematics are carefully and regularly monitored to make sure that teaching strategies are effective, and result in improved outcomes for pupils
- they use the highest-quality teaching in the school to develop the expertise of all staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the assistant headteacher, the mathematics team, the bursar, the chair and vice chair of governors and an improvement adviser from the local authority. Two further governors joined us for the feedback. You and I toured the school during the day to observe the quality of teaching and learning in all classes, and in phonics groups. While we did this, we took the opportunity to look at the pupils' books. I carried out a further scrutiny of writing and mathematics books from Years 2, 4 and 6.

I took account of 12 staff questionnaires, 58 responses from pupils to the online survey, 15 responses to the online survey Parent View, three written comments from parents and a recent school survey of parents' views. I also met some parents at the start of the day. I had lunch with pupils. I looked at a range of the school's documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. I also looked at, and discussed with you and the chair of governors, the evaluation of the school's effectiveness and the current improvement plan.