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Mrs Linda Buchanan
Executive Headteacher
Belchamp St Paul Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
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Dear Mrs Buchanan

Short inspection of Belchamp St Paul Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 31 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 April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Three new teachers have been employed since 2012, one of whom was a newly qualified teacher and who remains with you to date. All but two of the teaching assistants have been appointed since the previous inspection. You have managed two staff maternity leaves and seen the retirement of your experienced deputy headteacher. One teacher has returned from maternity leave and is working part time in key stage 1. You sourced an experienced teacher, who is known well to parents and pupils, to share the key stage 1 position. She also teaches part time in upper key stage 2. These arrangements are working well as you have provided the time for effective liaison between teachers, ensuring pupils' continued learning. There have been six changes in membership of the governing body, four of which are very recent. This includes the governor who is now overseeing the effectiveness of safeguarding.

Since the previous inspection, the structure of the school has also changed. In response to an increasing roll and a need for clearer focus on how children in the Reception Year learn, you have now separated this year group so that children are taught in a single-age class. Other classes remain mixed aged. You have overseen improvements to the front entrance to the building, which is now more secure. There is also a new learning space that is separate from the main school and that is used for small-group work.

In recent years, you have had two periods of working as an executive headteacher in other local schools. During those times, the very able and newly appointed deputy headteacher has led the school. Since September, she has become the head of school. You both work very closely together to ensure that Belchamp St Paul stands only to benefit from this joint leadership, which continues to date. As a consequence of this working arrangement, leadership within the school has developed considerably as other leaders have stepped up to the plate to backfill roles and positions. Many of your staff are 'home grown' and are very effectively leading aspects of school improvement, for example in the early years. These leaders' reflective skills have undoubtedly influenced the whole-school drive for school improvement and have contributed to the good standards in the school.

You and your leaders know the school extremely well and have accurately identified the areas of strength and those that need to be improved. You have created a culture of continual learning within staff and pupils, which was very apparent during the meetings I held. Pupils are used to regularly revisiting and editing their work. Teachers lay out books on the floor for when pupils arrive, and pupils readily collect their books and begin to check what it is they need to do to improve their work. In a calm and industrious atmosphere, pupils settle quickly, complete their tasks and respond appropriately. This is particularly effective in key stage 2 and pupils say that they find it really helpful.

It is clear from my visit and from the surveys that pupils and staff completed that you have a team of committed, caring and passionate staff. One example from staff was, 'I feel very proud to work at this school with such committed and hardworking colleagues alongside me.' Pupils say that they enjoy coming to their 'amazing, friendly and safe school'. They feel that they are listened to and that everyone is there to help and care for them. They particularly like the fact that if they have a concern that they do not want to share more widely, the head of school encourages them to write a note to her and to place it in her pigeon hole. They know that she will respond quickly. The influence that pupils say they have on so many decisions that are made within school is palpable, for example, the 'suggestion penguin'. From this came the naming of the 'learning lodge', and the debate about whether Year 6 pupils should go first in the dinner queue. Not only is this an opportunity for pupils to learn about democracy and the difference they can make to their school, but it also reinforces the school's values.

Parents made it very clear in their views on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, that they greatly value the work of the Reception class adults. 'I feel that the teacher genuinely takes time to get to know my son,' said one parent. Children in the early years were keen to talk to me about their learning, and did so very eloquently. 'She's the oldest child in the class and her birthday is in September,' said one girl. The conversation that then ensued, using the 'birthday cake' display, was impressive. Children were able to say whose birthday was next, reading the child's name, which month had no birthdays at all, and who is the youngest!

Children moved from one activity to another, gently guided by adults who posed questions appropriately. 'Have the rat and the cat got the same number of beans?' asked the teacher when children were doing basic division of 20. 'Yes we have shared them out so they have 10 each, and 10 add 10 makes 20,' said one boy. Such regular prompts from all adults in the classroom ensure that children are making good progress from their various starting points. They readily use the outside area to extend their learning, practising early writing skills and familiarising themselves with the 'hanging numbers'. You have plans for the very good practice of capturing children's active learning evident in the Reception class to develop further into key stage 1.

The emphasis you have put on improving outcomes in writing is clearly evident. Even the very youngest children make sensible guesses at sounds they use in their writing and are beginning to make short sentences. Throughout the school, teachers provide a number of different opportunities for pupils to write at length, practise their basic English skills and write with confidence. Although pupils in key stage 1 have recently made good progress in their writing, there is still some work to do to ensure that they achieve as well as they can by the end of Year 2. You and your leaders are doing everything possible to support both staff and pupils. Two additional teaching assistants have recently joined the class.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff and governors are committed to ensuring that pupils are safe and secure at school. Thorough procedures are in place to check that all staff have undergone recent and appropriate child protection and safeguarding training. Effective checks are made on the suitability of staff to work with children. Induction of new staff is very thorough. Staff are aware of which colleagues are trained in paediatric and general first aid. The school's systems for recording incidents of concern are well developed. Leaders effectively use the information that this system generates, highlighting any patterns in, for example, poor behaviour which is rare. Pupils know about the different types of bullying which 'sometimes happens but is scarce,' as one pupil said. They know how to keep themselves safe in school and on the internet. One parent said, 'I have full confidence in the school, and feel that it is a safe place for my child.' Leaders liaise well with the headteacher of the virtual school and regularly review the provision for the school's most vulnerable pupils. As a result of effective action and work with families, attendance of the most vulnerable pupils is steadily improving, and in some cases, markedly so. Consequently, these pupils are progressing well.

The website complies with statutory guidance.

The local authority continues to work well with the school. Support has been appropriate since the school's previous Ofsted judgement. Governors have accessed good support from governor services and value this resource. A local authority officer has supported the school's early years leader to improve provision and outside learning for the Reception class. Both the diocese and local authority have worked with the governing body to ensure that Belchamp St Paul and other schools in the community benefit from good leadership.

Inspection findings

- One of my key lines of enquiry was to check on improvements in provision and outcomes in the early years. This was an area for improvement identified in the previous inspection. The teacher, who is also the early years leader, has a very clear understanding of the needs of children in this year group. Although she has only been at the school for three years and was a newly qualified teacher on arrival, she has developed the provision and curriculum beyond that seen in the previous inspection. Teaching responds to children's needs and is clearly influenced by what parents share about their children's development at home. 'The regular online updates we receive are brilliant!' said one parent on the Parent View survey. As a consequence of this very well-developed partnership, the proportion of children who achieved a good level of development in 2016 was above the national average. This looks set to be similar in 2017. Adults carry out detailed and very regular assessments of each child, which ensures that their learning is individualised and appropriate to each child's needs. As a result, children currently in the Reception class are making good progress from their varying starting points.
- The second line of enquiry related to how well you have strengthened leadership and management, which was also an area for development identified in the previous inspection. The work that you have done to develop leaders' monitoring and evaluation skills is considerable. Even those who are new to their roles are ably and significantly contributing to school improvement. The school's plans for improvement accurately identify where progress is good and where there is room for further development. Leaders at all levels contribute to regular monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning. The detailed knowledge that you and your leaders have of each pupil is second to none. You all know the families well and therefore, any barriers to learning are significantly reduced. The impact has been continued and pupils' outcomes are good in most areas. Work in pupils' books shows good progress from a variety of starting points. As a result of accurate assessment and targeted support, outcomes for pupils in key stage 2 were above the national average in 2014 and 2015. Outcomes in 2016 were either close to or above the national average in reading and mathematics, but below in writing, and grammar, punctuation and spelling. Pupils' outcomes in key stage 1 were at least in line with the national average in 2016 in writing and mathematics, but were below in reading and in the Year 1 phonics check, which dipped this year.
- The third line of enquiry related to the progress and attainment of pupils in writing. Progress in 2016 for some pupils in key stages 1 and 2 was not good enough. We discussed the reasons why pupils in Year 1 did not achieve well in the phonics check, which has affected their writing. The proportion of pupils in this cohort who achieved a good level of development in 2015 was below the national average, and in particular in writing. In 2017, the proportion of pupils reaching the standard required in the phonics check looks set to be above the national average and is reflected in the writing skills of those pupils in Year 1.

- Progress of current Year 2 pupils is good in writing, but less so in reading and mathematics. However, there is some way to go to ensure that writing outcomes are in line with the national average in 2017. Predictions for this year are realistic and based on moderated writing assessments. You have put in place considerable support for individuals, the impact of which is beginning to be seen. Further support will continue to ensure that progress is more even across all subjects and that the difference between some of this group's attainment and that of others nationally is diminished in 2017. Across the school, pupils know their writing targets for improvement and many refer to them regularly. Enthusiasm for writing exists throughout the school and good examples of writing in, for example, geography, history and science, adorn the walls.
- My last line of enquiry related to reading. Although reading outcomes have been secure since the previous inspection, in 2016 they were less so for a number of pupils in both key stages 1 and 2, but particularly for key stage 1. Coupled with the poor phonics check results in 2016, this area needed further exploration. The school's own assessments show that reading progress is, in some year groups, less than in writing and mathematics. You and your leaders eloquently explained the next steps that you are taking in developing pupils' reading skills. Phonics training for all new teaching assistants is taking place imminently. A new approach to how reading is taught is being trialled in key stage 2 and, from the evidence we saw during my visit, is proving very successful. Pupils are developing a good understanding of different authors' work, explore a variety of genres and demonstrate an empathy for the characters in the books they read. The English subject lead is an excellent role model for all staff. Her subject knowledge and enthusiasm for developing pupils as readers and authors are infectious. During one lesson, pupils were taking an in-depth look at how Roald Dahl used repetitive language and personification in 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory'. The conversation between pupils not only focused on the character they were discussing, but also showed empathy for that character, often beyond their age. 'He is a boy with a small life and big dreams,' said one boy. You recognise that there is still some way to go with this new approach. All staff have now had the opportunity to see the benefits of this way of teaching and they all welcome this more focused approach.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the progress of pupils in key stage 1 is more even in achieving high standards in reading, writing and mathematics
- the very good practice for capturing children's active learning that exists in the Reception class is developed into Year 1
- every opportunity is used to develop further pupils' reading skills.

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

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, your head of school (who is also the subject leader for mathematics) and the subject leader for English to discuss progress since the previous inspection. I spoke with your early years leader to discuss provision and outcomes for children and the impact of decisions she has made. I met with a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body, and with a group of pupils selected by you. I spoke on the telephone with a representative of the local authority. I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including your self-evaluation, the school's plans for improvement and assessment information for all year groups. I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and information relating to attendance. We both undertook observations of learning in a variety of subjects across the school, viewed work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons. I took account of the views of 11 staff and 14 pupils who responded to the online surveys. Almost all responses were positive. I also recorded the 42 Parent View responses, in which, for example, 98% of parents would recommend Belchamp St Paul to others. Some parents expressed a concern that they had not been given up-to-date information about the leadership of the school, which governors are keen to address quickly.