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Ms Maria Soulsby
Headteacher
St James' Church of England VA Lower School
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Dear Ms Soulsby

Short inspection of St James' Church of England VA Lower School

Following my visit to the school on 25 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 March 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your incisive leadership, coupled with high expectations for all pupils to achieve well both academically and in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, have been pivotal in moving the school forward rapidly. You have focused relentlessly on improving the quality of teaching, learning and safeguarding since your appointment and you lead by example. The actions you have taken have led to substantial improvement in pupils' progress, especially disadvantaged pupils, who do particularly well. Standards are well above average in reading, above average in writing and average in mathematics. This year you are training and coaching all subject leaders to drive forward improvements in their subjects. This is work in progress, but the impact is beginning to show in pupils' better achievement in other subjects such as music, physical education and computing.

In the previous inspection, writing and mathematics were identified as areas to develop. This is why I looked at these in more detail during this inspection. I found that pupils are now writing extensively in all subjects, as seen in the written work in their books. The key skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are taught well throughout the school, although in their handwriting, pupils do not consistently form their letters correctly.

Teachers expect pupils to use what they learn in literacy when writing in other subjects. This is a marked improvement. You have used your expertise in mathematics beneficially to improve teaching in the subject. You have trained staff well in getting to grips with the higher expectations in the 2014 national curriculum for what pupils should know and understand in each year group. We watched pupils using models, images and practical apparatus well to support their understanding and reasoning skills. Importantly, pupils are enjoying the subject and they are confident to 'have a go'. We heard pupils echoing the school's mantra, 'It's not that I can't do it. I can't do it yet,' as they were working. We also saw them talking to staff and each other about their work and explaining their thinking. You have done a sterling job in raising the profile of mathematics as a subject. You have introduced new teaching methods and approaches to ensure that most pupils make at least expected progress. With your other leadership responsibilities and a school that is destined to expand by at least two classes when it becomes a primary school next year, sustainability is an issue. Governors are aware of this and have taken it into account in planning for the future.

Outcomes are improving but, over time, too few children in Reception have reached a good level of development and few exceeded the early learning goals. With this in mind, early years provision and children's achievement were my second key line of enquiry. The early years leader has undoubtedly made significant improvements in the quality of provision to raise attainment. Records of children's progress and photographic evidence of the range of provision before and after steps were taken to raise the quality of teaching and learning confirmed this. The range of provision indoors and outside covers all of the required areas of learning in the early years curriculum. Adults engage children in conversation readily to develop their speaking and listening skills.

Children's personal development is catered for extremely well. In Reception, we saw happy, confident boys and girls who mixed well and were able to cooperate and share tools and toys as they played. Parents noted how well staff support their children to settle into school quickly and take into account their individual needs and interests when planning for learning. However, the range of inspiring and tempting opportunities for children to practise their early mark-making and writing skills is fairly narrow. The most able pupil's attainment in writing is lower than expected when they move into Year 1.

Parents have noticed how the school has improved, particularly in the past two years. Many of the 67 respondents to Parent View wrote glowing comments about the school such as:

- 'A fantastic school led by a wonderful and effective headteacher.'
- 'St James' epitomises everything that an enriching village school should offer.'
- 'The headteacher is enthusiastic, approachable and has clearly been making great improvements to this school.'
- 'This school is extremely well led and my child is happy here.'

- 'My children love their school. They say it is easy to make friends and the teachers are there when you need them.'

Of these 67 parents, 99% confirmed in the questionnaire that they would recommend the school to another parent.

Similarly, staff are right behind you in supporting your desire for continuous improvement. Results from 10 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire are entirely positive. Staff all strongly agreed, for example, that pupils' behaviour is at least good, pupils are safe, and that the school has a culture that encourages calm and orderly conduct and is aspirational for all pupils. They also appreciate your expertise in providing them with training and encouragement to develop their professional skills. This matches precisely your inspiring high ambition for staff and pupils to flourish as learners which came across convincingly in all discussions.

Governors share your ambition. They provide effective governance. They support you in all that you aim to achieve and are confident to challenge you and hold you to account. The governing body is forward looking in planning ahead for the school's growth. While extensions to the building are in the pipeline, they remain focused on ensuring that all pupils achieve well.

The school is in safe hands moving forward. You and the governors agreed that while staff are leading their areas of responsibility more confidently, they still rely on you too much to guide and advise them. You have, rightly, identified strengthening leadership as a priority in the school's plans for improvement, coupled with raising achievement in writing and mathematics. You have chosen your actions wisely but you and the governors have not set measurable criteria with quantitative targets where possible, against which progress can be judged. It is unclear how the impact of your work will be checked and evaluated and by whom.

Safeguarding is effective.

- You have developed a culture where everyone shares responsibility for safeguarding and it is a priority. Together with governors, you have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are of high quality and records are detailed and completed diligently.
- A strong ethos surrounding children's safety and well-being exists within the school community, and parents agree.
- You ensure that staff receive regular training to keep them abreast of any updates in statutory guidance.
- Staff and all adults who come into regular contact with children are vetted carefully prior to appointment. All of the statutory checks are made to ensure their suitability to work with children.
- All staff are entirely confident in raising concerns and recording them properly. You follow them up quickly and refer them on to the local authority's designated officer and/or children's services if needs be.

- Documentation, including individual child protection case files, is kept in very good chronological order and important information can be retrieved easily.
- Assessment of risk for educational visits is thorough and comprehensive.

Inspection findings

- To ascertain that the school had successfully addressed points for improvement identified in the previous inspection about writing and mathematics, we visited all classes to see pupils learning and to look at work in their books. This provided unequivocal evidence that all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, are making good progress from their starting points. Some pupils in Year 1 are making rapid progress in writing from lower than expected starting points.
- Attainment by the end of Year 2 is well above average in reading because the teaching of phonics and other reading skills is effective from an early age. Written work in pupils' books shows their proficiency in using their knowledge of phonics to spell sophisticated words in their writing. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check by the end of Years 1 and 2 is above the national figures.
- Pupils in Years 3 and 4 make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Your information about current pupils' learning shows that pupils' attainment in Year 4 is a little lower than it should be. However, they are making faster than expected progress and are on track to catch up this year.
- I was able to confirm by spending time in Reception, looking at records of children's progress and talking to the early years leader, that children are now making better progress because the provision has improved. In recognition that previously too few children reached a good level of development, a higher target of 75% has been set. Even so, we agreed that some of the most able children's writing is not as well developed as it should be at this stage of the school year.
- Since the previous inspection, a new national curriculum has been introduced and inevitably the school has had to adjust its assessment practice accordingly. I looked at this in detail. The school has successfully implemented the 2014 national curriculum in all subjects.
- You have introduced robust systems to check that pupils are making enough progress. Staff check and double check the accuracy of their judgements. You hold staff to account for pupils' achievement in managing their performance. You regularly look at the work in pupils' books, take into account the results of standardised tests, and talk to class teachers about the progress that every pupil is making. You have an electronic system for recording pupils' progress and use this effectively to identify any pupils who are falling behind and in need of extra help.

- I met with subject leaders to gather evidence about teaching and learning in their subjects. This was not limited to English and mathematics because good teaching should ensure that pupils make consistently good progress in a wide range of subjects. Subject leaders provided secure evidence of pupils' good achievement in music, sport and computing. Pupils engage readily in concerts and musical events; they take up a wide range of sporting activities such as archery and participate in competitive events, and they use technology proficiently and safely.
- You have ensured that teachers are receiving high-quality coaching to develop their skills as leaders of subjects. They are becoming more confident in presenting evidence to back up their judgements about how well pupils are learning. This is work in progress. Some of them are not yet evaluating the quality of teaching by observing it at first hand to identify what is working well and what could be even better.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle leadership continues to develop and strengthen, with less reliance on your guidance
- measurable criteria are used to check progress towards planned actions in the school improvement plan
- the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception rises and the most able children make better progress in their writing
- new approaches and methods in teaching mathematics are refined and embedded so that pupils achieve as well in mathematics as they do in reading and writing.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- I held meetings with you, the early years leader and subject leaders for English, mathematics, the arts, physical education and computing. We discussed the key lines of enquiry for this inspection, the school's internal evaluation of its performance, plans for future improvement and information about current pupils' learning.
- We observed teaching and learning in all classes. We looked at a sample of the work in pupils' writing and mathematics books.
- The school's safeguarding arrangements, records, files and documentation were examined. Discussions were held with the designated safeguarding lead. A case study of a vulnerable pupil was undertaken.
- I met with the chair and vice-chair of the governing body and five other governors. The views of 67 parents who responded to Parent View and 10 staff who completed Ofsted's staff questionnaire were taken into account.
- I spoke to the school's improvement adviser on the telephone.