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Michelle Hughes
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Dear Mrs Hughes

Short inspection of Thaxted Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 2 February 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 June 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. This is no small achievement given that the school has undergone many changes in leadership in recent years. The deputy headteacher has been the acting headteacher on two occasions and key stage leaders took on additional responsibilities. The acting special educational needs coordinator, like you, began her role four weeks ago. Since the previous inspection, the post of early years leader has evolved, and French is now taught by a specialist rather than by class teachers. There are a number of well-established job-shares in the school.

The substantive headteacher left the school in August 2016. In January 2017, you took up your post as permanent headteacher at the school. You have quickly established effective relationships with staff, pupils and parents. Although you have inherited the school's self-evaluation and plans for improvement, you are already working very well with governors and staff to ensure that both documents accurately reflect the school's current strengths and areas of development. You recognise, for example, that the plans for improvement are not focused sharply enough on pupil outcomes.

You have undertaken a thorough review of pupils' progress and attainment and observed teaching and learning in all areas of the school. Consequently, you know that there is some variation in pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics in a minority of classes. You and your leaders also recognise that you will need to

evaluate pupils' outcomes within classes and not just year groups. This will enable you to have a very clear indication of how well the split year group teaching is working for all pupils. It will also enable you to better hold teachers to account for the progress of pupils within their individual classes and subjects.

There is a real 'buzz' of purposeful learning at Thaxted Primary. In every class visited, pupils were not only engaged in their learning, but also enjoying it. The sense of calm in all classrooms ensures that pupils concentrate on their work and diligently get on with the task at hand. From the very youngest to the oldest, pupils were able to eloquently explain what they were learning and were keen to show me. As one pupil told me, 'I am proud to be part of this school because I think I am getting a good education.' This ethos brings to life, daily, the school's motto: 'Together, Learning for Life'. Pupils say that they would like even more challenge, especially those who are most-able, who 'like to choose a challenge that really stretches us'. The very youngest children are encouraged to say what they are feeling about their learning, which is then written and placed on the 'Proud Clouds' and 'Wow Moments' displays. These celebrations demonstrate beautifully children's progress in their learning both at home and at school.

Teachers ensure that learning is interesting. 'It's good to be here because learning is always fun' said a pupil. Pupils' work adorns the walls of many of the communal spaces throughout the school. You, your staff and pupils can be very proud of the standard and variety of artwork that is displayed. It is evident from looking at work in pupils' books and the various displays in classrooms that teachers plan the experiences that they share with pupils carefully and creatively. Teachers ensure that work is interesting and varied and catches pupils' imagination. Work in pupils' books clearly evidences the use of mathematics and basic English in subjects like geography, history, science and art.

Pupils are well-behaved, courteous and very eloquent. They support each other well in learning and while at play, for example in the 'enchanted garden'. They enjoy the additional responsibilities they have and understand that they 'need to be trustworthy'. You and your leaders are rightly proud of the way that pupils at Thaxted understand how they can influence life at their school.

Pupils say that they feel safe, are cared for well and are happy. Likewise, as one parent who responded to the online survey Parent View stated, 'This is a fantastic school with caring and committed staff. We feel very lucky to have our child here.' Pupils know about the different types of bullying. At almost every turn in the building, there are regular reminders about what pupils should do if they are concerned about anything. They know how to keep themselves safe in school and on the internet.

Safeguarding is effective.

Vigilance over safeguarding is evident in the very fabric of the school. Very thorough procedures are in place to check that all staff have undergone recent and appropriate child protection and safeguarding training. The school business

manager is meticulous in the checks she makes on the suitability of staff to work with children. Induction of new staff is very thorough. The school's systems for recording incidents of concern are very well developed.

The very effective work that the pastoral care manager undertakes is welcomed and appreciated by pupils, parents and staff. The care afforded to children and families is exemplary. Consequently, very effective relationships have developed which impact on pupils' ongoing care and safety. Highly effective liaison with external agencies ensures that pupils and families are supported extremely well, both inside and outside of the school. The vast majority of pupils arrive at school on time. Attendance of the most vulnerable pupils is monitored and discussed weekly and, as a result of the school's work, the attendance of these pupils is slowly improving.

Inspection findings

- To ascertain that the school remained good, my first line of enquiry related to whether leaders have successfully managed to improve the overall quality of teaching since the previous inspection. There have been many changes in teaching staff in recent years, some of whom are relatively new to teaching and who have replaced more experienced members of staff. The school's monitoring of teaching and learning over time demonstrates that it is largely good, though there are some pockets of variation in classes and subjects. Leaders have put in place appropriate support for colleagues, the impact of which is clearly evident both in terms of teachers' development and also the progress of pupils.
- Leaders have also adjusted provision in classes to ensure that pupils make the best progress that they can. For example, in one class, the two teachers who job-share now work together on at least one day to teach separate groups of pupils who have been identified as needing additional support. As well as this, Year 6 pupils are now taught together one morning a week. This has enabled teachers to split the group and address the needs of individual pupils more consistently. It was evident during my visit that this is already paying dividends.
- As a result of leaders' actions, the overall progress of all groups of pupils currently in the school is good. However, work in pupils' books and the school's own assessments show that there are still pockets where a minority of teaching of some subjects is still not yet consistently good. As you have identified in your detailed analysis of pupils' outcomes, there are also some most-able pupils who do not progress as well as they might.
- Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are provided for well. Adults are very effectively deployed in all classrooms. Sensitive and appropriate comments and suggestions by learning assistants help to support pupils, particularly in mathematics. Many teachers give good guidance to pupils in their books. Pupils say that this helps them understand how they can improve their work.
- The second line of enquiry focused on how successfully leaders have sustained and built upon the improvements in pupils' progress and attainment in writing identified at the previous inspection. Expected outcomes at the end of key stages 1 and 2 were above the national average in 2013, 2014 and 2015, as was the

proportion of pupils achieving the higher standards. The proportion of pupils making expected or more than expected progress in writing was, likewise, above the national average in key stage 2. In 2016, at key stage 1, the proportion of pupils who achieved the expected standard was, again, above the national average. However, outcomes of pupils at the end of Year 6 were not as positive. Attainment in writing was below average, and progress for lower- and middle-achieving pupils was significantly below average.

- Overall, across the school, writing is taught well and supported well by teachers' comments and guidance. In early writing, children make sensible phonic choices, which continues into key stage 1. Teachers build in many opportunities for pupils to write at length and in subjects other than English. As a result of careful analysis and support, leaders have ensured that current Year 6 pupils will achieve as well as they are able in 2017. The arrangements enabling the two Year 6 classes to be taught together one morning a week have proved successful. You have already discussed whether to increase these opportunities at other times in the week as part of the rapid improvement plan that leaders have put in place for Year 6.
- The third line of enquiry related to how well mathematics is taught in the school. Previous results had indicated that not enough middle-ability pupils made expected progress. The proportion of pupils in Year 6 who attained the expected level in 2016, including those who were disadvantaged, was below the national average. The school's own assessment information and the work in pupils' books, show that there are very few current pupils who are not making the expected progress. Where this is the case, appropriate support is in place and is regularly monitored to ensure that these pupils catch up with their classmates. As a result, there is now a larger proportion of pupils whose progress is accelerating.
- We both observed learning in mathematics in many of the classes during my visit. Pupils were all on task, many debating how they could solve a problem or check the accuracy of their answers.
- Nonetheless, some teachers have greater expertise in, and passion for, differing subjects. It is this, rather than subject knowledge, that has caused some variance in the teaching of mathematics. The mathematics subject leader has already put in place actions to ensure that the teaching is more consistent and, therefore, that pupils' progress is at least that which is expected. The impact of her decision to purchase some additional resources has undoubtedly supported teachers.
- The fourth line of enquiry related to how well reading is taught across the school. This was because phonics in 2016 dipped below what it had previously been, indicating a three-year decline. Key stage 2 progress in reading in 2016 was significantly below average, particularly for lower- and middle-achieving pupils. There were also some groups in key stage 1 who did not make good progress since they left the Reception class. Some of the most-able pupils in Year 6 also did not attain as well as they could have.
- Current attainment and progress in reading across the school is at least what should be expected and, in the majority of year groups, an increasing proportion of pupils are making better than expected progress. No one particular group is attaining or progressing poorly. There are, however, two year groups where

progress should be better. Pupils say that they enjoy reading. The very youngest children use their phonic skills well to read unfamiliar words. Teachers use a range of texts that both challenge pupils and interest them. Many pupils are skilled at using dictionaries to find the meaning of unfamiliar words and do so with little prompting. This expanding vocabulary is beginning to be used accurately and well in pupils' writing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all plans for improvement are focused on pupils' outcomes, so that the impact of leaders' decisions can be clearly evidenced and progress of all groups of pupils is carefully evaluated
- any variation in pupils' outcomes within some classes and subjects is eradicated and pupils make good progress from their particular starting points
- the most able pupils are consistently challenged throughout the school so that they achieve as well as they are able.

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

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, your acting deputy headteacher, who also leads English, and the subject leader for mathematics to discuss progress since the previous inspection. I spoke with your new acting special educational needs coordinator to discuss provision and outcomes for this group of pupils and the impact of provision. 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 met with the school business manager to examine the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks that leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children, and information relating to attendance. We both undertook observations of learning across the school, viewed work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning during lessons. I took account of the views of 18 staff who responded to the online survey. I also recorded the 51 Parent View responses and 44 texts.