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Mr S Cowdery
Headteacher
Norton St Nicholas CofE (VA) Primary School
Norton Road
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Dear Mr Cowdery

Short inspection of Norton St Nicholas CofE (VA) Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 28 March 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. You and the school's other leaders have a very accurate understanding of its strengths and the areas that need further development, such as improving outcomes in writing. As a result, this is a good and improving school. Pupils enjoy coming to Norton St Nicholas and they make good progress. You and the governing body have tackled the areas for development from the previous inspection well.

You have a strong commitment to continually improving the school so that it becomes outstanding in due course. You have introduced a 'joint practice development' approach to school improvement and you have found that this has increased the effectiveness of the way staff work together. For example, staff are currently working together to improve pupils' attitudes to learning. You are beginning to see the impact of the measures that have been introduced.

School improvement is not as rapid as it could be because it is not sufficiently sharply focused on the most important areas. You use a 'scatter gun' approach to planning what to work on, rather than focusing on the highest priorities. In other words, your action plan has so many areas of focus that your efforts are diluted rather than having the maximum impact possible on the things that will make the most difference.

Parents are very positive about the school. Almost all of the parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, said that they would recommend the school to others. Many parents chose to leave additional comments, such as, 'Both my daughters are very happy in this school, they have developed well and are encouraged to achieve above and beyond on a daily basis.' Another parent said, 'My three children all love going to school and are developing in this caring environment. I have faith in the teachers and believe that the children's well-being is paramount.'

Pupils are polite, friendly and courteous. They have pride in their school and are keen to discuss their learning and the topics they cover. Pupils say that teachers are 'really supportive' and 'really fun'. They talk about how teachers 'make you believe in yourself' and how this helps them to do well at school. Pupils have excellent attitudes to equality. In a meeting during the inspection, one pupil summed up the group's feelings by saying that 'we respect people for how they are, not how they look'. Pupils have been taught about civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela, and this has helped them to understand the importance of treating everyone fairly.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's single central record of pre-employment checks meets statutory requirements. All necessary checks are undertaken to ensure that only suitable people are employed to work with children. As the school's designated safeguarding lead, you have received appropriate training to enable you to fulfil the role effectively. The assistant headteacher and the special educational needs coordinator have both also undertaken designated safeguarding lead training. This ensures that there is always a suitably trained member of staff available should a concern arise. You have ensured that records of child protection concerns are thorough and kept securely.

Staff understand the importance of safeguarding and ensuring that pupils feel safe, as well as of keeping them safe. One pupil summed this up by saying, 'Teachers make you feel like school is a safe place.' Pupils have been taught the acronym STOP ('several times on purpose') to help them to recognise bullying. They say that bullying is rare and that it is sorted out 'instantly' if you tell a member of staff.

Inspection findings

- In order to check whether or not the school remains good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. The first was to look at why in 2016, key stage 2 results in writing were below the national average, and then to look at whether current pupils are making good progress in writing.
- You explained the reasons for this to me very clearly. The school was not sufficiently well prepared for the increased demands of the new system of assessment, brought in in 2016, compared with the previous system. As a result, pupils did not make as much progress, nor reach the level of attainment, that they should have done. You have taken immediate action to address the

weaknesses in writing and it is clear that these are beginning to have an effect. Current pupils are making good progress throughout the school and some pupils are making rapid progress.

- However, you are not complacent and you know that there is still work to do. Pupils are taught grammar, punctuation and spelling but they are not given sufficient opportunities to apply these skills in their own writing. Pupils are often given work to do that does not allow them to write freely or at length. This lack of practice means that pupils' writing is too often littered with spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. There is a wide variation in the quality of pupils' handwriting and the presentation of their work. While some pupils have developed a neat and efficient handwriting style, too much of pupils' work lacks care and shows immature handwriting.
- The second area that I looked at closely was whether disadvantaged pupils are making good progress throughout the school. The very small proportion of disadvantaged pupils at Norton St Nicholas means that published assessment data is of very little use because cohort sizes are so small.
- Provision for this group of pupils is led and managed very effectively. There are currently 16 pupils who are known to be eligible for the pupil premium grant. These pupils are known very well, as individuals, and their progress is tracked frequently and carefully. Leaders have high expectations of what this group of pupils can and should achieve. As a result, disadvantaged pupils are making good progress and often rapid progress throughout the school.
- The third line of enquiry concerned previously low-attaining pupils. I looked at whether these pupils are making the accelerated progress necessary, particularly in mathematics, so they catch up with their classmates. This group of pupils made broadly average progress in reading and writing in the key stage 2 national tests in 2016. However, they made less than average progress in mathematics.
- The school's assessment information, and the work in pupils' exercise books, show clearly that this group of pupils are making good progress. In almost all year groups, low-attaining pupils who need to catch up are making accelerated progress in reading, writing and mathematics.
- You have explored the inconsistency of achievement between boys and girls closely, and have discussed it fully with the local authority school improvement partner. You have been unable to find any clear evidence of outcomes for either gender being weaker or stronger than the other over time. The school's current assessment shows that boys and girls are making equally good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. The work in pupils' exercise books, conversations with pupils and observations in classrooms all confirm this.
- Finally, I focused on attendance, particularly the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. I chose to look carefully at this area because, in the past, attendance has been below average for these groups and their persistent absence rates have been in the highest 10% nationally.
- You have ensured that there is a suitably high focus on promoting good attendance. Pupils' attendance is monitored closely and prompt action is taken in

response to absences. Where pupils' persistent absence has caused concern, you have taken firm and decisive action, such as sending warning letters to parents. The actions you have taken have resulted in improvements in attendance for individual pupils. In some cases, improvements in rates of attendance have been dramatic. The overall rate of attendance for pupils at the school is currently above the most recent national average. No groups of pupils are disadvantaged by low attendance.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- improve the quality of teaching of writing, so that more pupils make rapid progress, by:
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to apply their spelling and grammar knowledge in their own writing
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to write freely and at length
 - teaching handwriting explicitly, and ensuring that expectations for the way pupils present their work are sufficiently high
- ensure that school action plans are more tightly focused on the school's most important priorities for improvement.

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 Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Varney
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior leaders and a group of governors. I met with the school council and spoke with other pupils during the day. I spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone. I took into account the 57 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, including 51 text responses. I also took into account the three responses that were received to the staff survey. I observed teaching and learning in lessons, jointly with you, and looked at the work in pupils' exercise books. I scrutinised a range of school documents.