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Mr Craig Twin
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Dear Mr Twin

Short inspection of St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 3 May 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 May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Leaders have developed an ethos in which pupils develop confidence socially and academically. Parents, pupils and staff are proud of their school and its caring, inclusive approach. Parental comments such as 'I cannot speak highly enough of the support and encouragement my child receives' and 'We are consistently pleased with the teaching and ethos of the school' are typical of sentiments expressed by the vast majority of parents. One pupil summed up the views of many others in saying, 'I love learning here.'

You are rightly proud of pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning. Pupils rarely miss a day and typically conduct themselves well. In lessons, they are keen to learn, supportive of each other and respond well to the challenging tasks they are set. Pupils' behaviour around the school site is equally impressive. They mix together easily, playing energetically and with good humour. There is a positive 'buzz' around St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School. You are correctly ensuring that staff are well trained in behaviour management, so that should any incidents occur, adults have the skills to deal with them appropriately.

Since your appointment in October 2016, you and your recently appointed deputy headteacher have quickly gained an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Using this information, you have put in place well-

focused plans to bring about further improvements where you correctly judge they are needed. For example, you recognise that subject leaders have a greater understanding of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment than at the time of the previous inspection. However, you rightly acknowledge that not all subject leaders have embraced their role in holding teachers to account for the progress pupils make.

You also recognise that teachers do not have equally high expectations of what pupils can achieve in some foundation subjects. Where expectations are high, such as in art and personal, social and health education (PSHE), pupils respond extremely well. For example, pupils' kind and thoughtful behaviour is a positive reflection on the subjects they discuss in 'circle time' (one aspect of PSHE). The high-quality art work on display showcases not only the good progress pupils make but also the rich range of cultures and topics they study.

Pupils told me how much they enjoy their learning, and this was clearly evident in my visits to each classroom. Many teachers are becoming skilled at planning activities that are well matched to pupils' capabilities and interests, in particular in English and mathematics. For example, children in Reception make good progress because the leader of early years ensures that activities interest them and develop their mathematical and English skills. As a result, higher proportions of children achieve a good level of development than is nationally the case. Children are well prepared for the next stage of their education. Parents told me how impressed they are with the start their children make to their education at St John's.

Governors share your ambitions for the school. They have reflected upon their practice and recognised that they have not been robust enough in their challenge of the school in the past. Inspection evidence indicates that the governing body now offers precise and well-informed challenge to you and your leaders. Governors take appropriate steps to assure themselves of the quality of education provided and have an accurate understanding of what needs to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have established a transparent safeguarding culture at St John's. Staff and governors are acutely aware of their roles and responsibilities in keeping children safe. Many parents commented on how easy it is to approach any member of staff at the school if they have a concern about the education or well-being of their child.

Teachers make good use of the knowledge acquired through appropriate training, including that which relates to the government's 'Prevent' duty. Staff know how to recognise when a pupil may be vulnerable or at risk. Adults in school are familiar with the safeguarding systems and know what to do if they have a concern about the welfare of a pupil. You ensure that staff's knowledge is up to date through regular discussions at the weekly staff meetings. Staff explained that senior leaders respond appropriately to any concerns raised. Carefully maintained child protection records confirm this to be the case.

Pupils told me that they feel safe at school. They put this sense of security and well-being down to 'the work of our teachers' and the fact that the school site is well maintained and secure. A noticeable indication of their sense of security is the confidence with which they interact with each other and adults in this happy school. Each of the 57 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their child was safe at school. Several parents told me how impressed they were with the level of care and attention demonstrated towards their children by adults at the school. Inspection evidence supports their view.

Pupils understand what bullying is. They explained that this is not a frequent occurrence at their school. This was confirmed by information in the school's behaviour and bullying logs. Pupils also told me that if they reported any concerns, teachers would act swiftly and effectively.

The governing body ensures that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The designated safeguarding governor ensures that leaders carry out appropriate checks on the suitability of staff who work at the school. The governing body also seeks external validation that safeguarding records are up to date and accurately maintained. Governors follow up on any issues raised by these audits to make sure that the effective practice is maintained.

Inspection findings

- I sought to establish how well pupils achieve in mathematics in key stage 1. In 2016, at the end of this key stage, higher proportions of pupils achieved the expected standard in mathematics than is nationally the case. However, you rightly identified that this was not the case for a small number of middle-ability boys.
- Led by your knowledgeable leader of mathematics, you have made appropriate amendments to how teachers develop pupils' skills in mathematics. Work in pupils' books confirms that they are given more time to develop a deeper understanding of each aspect of mathematics.
- Once pupils have learned to master a technique, they are provided with more demanding tasks that require them to think deeply when applying their knowledge and skills. Pupils make good progress in mathematics and more are working towards greater depth. Almost all of the pupils I spoke with told me how much they enjoyed mathematics lessons and relished the additional challenge now evident in their lessons. One pupil commented, 'I like having the chance to work things out for myself.' When the opportunity arises, pupils put their mathematical skills to good use in subjects such as science and design and technology, which is an improvement since the previous inspection.
- Another key line of enquiry was to ascertain how well pupils achieve in writing at key stage 2. This was because, in 2016, while pupils, including most-able pupils, made similar progress to their peers nationally, you recognise that they could have achieved more.
- A scrutiny of pupils' work demonstrates that teachers are now providing them with opportunities to develop their writing skills well. In upper key stage 2, most-

able pupils confidently use sophisticated language in their persuasive and descriptive writing. Where a pupil needs additional support, they receive it through your 'precision teaching' programme. This support, combined with teachers' increased expectations and detailed focus on developing pupils' use of punctuation and grammar, is contributing to pupils typically making good progress in their writing.

- The same high expectations of pupils' writing is not consistently evident in subjects such as geography, science and history. In some classes, pupils are not provided with sufficient opportunities to apply high levels of literacy in these subjects. For example, the activities some teachers plan limit the extent to which pupils are able to analyse, explain and draw conclusions in science and history. Where they are given the chance to do so, pupils combine their literacy skills with subject-specific knowledge well. For example, this was evident in upper key stage 2 pupils' analysis of the reliability of scientific data they had gathered.
- In 2016, at the end of key stage 2, many pupils achieved well in reading. However, a small number of middle-ability boys did not achieve as well as their peers. You have precisely identified why this was the case, pinpointing the need to develop pupils' confidence in explaining the context of the books they study. You have taken action to ensure that teachers develop pupils' skills of comprehension more effectively. Inspection evidence, which included listening to pupils read, demonstrates that they have an increasingly detailed understanding of the texts they study. Boys spoke enthusiastically about the broader context of each book they were reading.
- As part of your carefully managed strategy to develop pupils' love of reading, you are making improvements to the school library and investing in wider genres of texts that more closely reflect pupils' interests and abilities. However, you acknowledge that more needs to be done to ensure that boys' progress in reading improves even further.
- To determine whether leaders have sustained a good-quality education, I explored how well all groups of pupils attend school. This was because while overall pupil attendance has been high since the previous inspection, that of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was low in 2016.
- You and your senior leaders monitor pupils' attendance with great precision. If a pupil's attendance falls, you take swift and effective action. I saw evidence that pupils who have previously attended less often than they should have now attend regularly. To complement your highly effective work to ensure that pupils attend well, you have chosen to enlist the services of an external attendance agency. Through this comprehensive approach, you have ensured that pupils' attendance, including that of groups of pupils, is higher than national averages.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all middle leaders are equipped with the skills, knowledge and opportunity to check the progress pupils make in subjects across the curriculum

- teachers have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve across the curriculum, including sufficient opportunities to apply literacy skills in all subjects
- they accelerate the work already under way to inspire boys to read more widely and further develop their skills of inference and comprehension, so that greater proportions reach the required standard by the end of key stage 2.

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

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- During the course of this inspection, I held meetings with you, your office manager, other senior leaders, a group of four subject leaders, a group of three teachers and a group of five governors.
- Together with you, I visited classes in each year group to observe pupils learning. In classes, I undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work in their books and folders to determine their progress over time.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined along with the school's record of checks carried out on adults working at the school.
- A range of documents were analysed or discussed, including the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, documents relating to pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour, and minutes of governor meetings.
- I spoke with pupils informally in classrooms and when walking around the school site. I also met with a group of 16 pupils chosen by you.
- I considered the views of 57 parents who responded to Parent View, as well as those of the 33 parents who provided comments using the free-text service. I also took into account the opinions of parents who spoke with me informally over the course of the inspection.