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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Mrs Susan Elliott
Headteacher
Penshurst Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
High Street
Penshurst
Tonbridge
Kent
TN11 8BX

Dear Mrs Elliott

Short inspection of Penshurst Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 11 July 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 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 last inspection. Since becoming headteacher of the school in January of this year, you have wasted no time in sharpening the ambition of the school. You have your finger on the pulse of the school, know its strengths and areas for improvement, and have identified the right areas to prioritise. You have focused unwaveringly on raising the levels of expectations of what pupils can achieve and improving the quality of teaching. Where it has been necessary, you have successfully challenged underperformance.

Pupils enjoy coming to school. They feel valued and well cared for because senior leaders have placed the welfare of pupils at the heart of the school. As a result, pupils are happy and feel safe. The much-valued sense of community and caring remain central to the school and its work. One parent commented, 'Penshurst school has a wonderful ethos. The children are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and their behaviour and, as a result, they are mature and happy.'

The whole school community is supportive of you and the improvements that you have already introduced. One member of staff said, 'It has been a pleasure watching the school spread its wings under new leadership. It is a very positive and exciting time to be working at Penshurst.' Parents echo this view and are united in saying that they would recommend the school.

Starting with the leaders of English and mathematics, you have begun to strengthen leadership by spreading responsibility more widely. You are helping other senior leaders to have a more strategic view of the school. All staff feel involved in driving the school forward because they understand that all are part of an extended leadership team with their own important part to play in helping the school to improve further.

Governors undertake their statutory responsibilities thoroughly and know the school well. They make sure that they reach their view of the school by considering a range of information. As a result, they have a clear view of the progress pupils make from their different starting points, and the quality of teaching in the school. Governors offer the right balance of effective support and challenge. The local authority and diocese have also provided effective support.

Leaders responded well to the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection. These have been addressed particularly thoroughly this academic year. Inspectors recommended that work is more carefully matched to the needs of pupils. During the inspection, I found evidence of teachers ensuring that the work was at the right level for pupils, including the most able. This was particularly the case in writing, although occasionally in mathematics the work was too easy for the most able pupils.

Inspectors also recommended that teachers offer pupils clear guidance on what they need to do in order to move their learning on. Pupils I spoke to during the inspection could explain clearly what they needed to do to improve their writing. They appreciate the advice and guidance that staff offer and regularly act upon it. Older pupils explained clearly how their targets give them a clear understanding of the next steps they need to take in their learning. They say that these targets help them to improve their work and make good progress. Leaders are aware of the need to develop this success further, in order to make sure that pupils of middle ability attain the highest standards of which they are capable, especially in writing.

Leaders were asked to check pupils' progress regularly to ensure that they are making at least good progress and to intervene quickly if there are any gaps in pupils' learning. You have introduced systems to provide teachers with access to detailed, accurate information about pupils' progress from different starting points. Senior leaders have worked hard to ensure that teachers understand how to use this information to identify pupils at risk of underachieving and to intervene quickly to help them catch up. Teachers are beginning to use this assessment information to enable pupils to make better progress; for example, by using it to provide work that challenges pupils to apply the skills they have secured, and so to deepen their mathematical understanding.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders rightly place the safety and well-being of pupils at the heart of their work, and there is a strong culture of safeguarding. Policies and procedures are fit for purpose and reviewed regularly. Records are detailed, accurate and well-maintained, including those to make sure that only suitable staff, volunteers and governors are allowed to work in the school.

You ensure that all staff in the school are well trained and kept up to date with the most

recent information. Staff are constantly vigilant to any concerns that may arise. They understand exactly what to do if they have concerns about a pupil, even if these are relatively minor worries. Staff understand that they can report concerns directly to the local authority if the need arises.

Pupils feel safe in school. They say that bullying is extremely rare because pupils' behaviour is typically kind and thoughtful. On the rare occasions when it does happen it is dealt with quickly. Staff in the school have the confidence of pupils, who say that there is always someone they could turn to if they had a worry. Parents echo this view.

Governors take an active role in checking safeguarding arrangements. This includes undertaking regular checks of the records of staff recruitment and conducting an annual safeguarding audit. Any areas for improvement are quickly addressed. Senior leaders involve the school in multi-agency working and planning to secure the well-being of pupils, especially around poor attendance. Leaders are aware of the need to continue their work to improve rates of attendance, especially for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Inspection findings

- We agreed to investigate the impact of leaders' actions to improve attainment and rates of progress for pupils of average ability in writing. In 2016, the proportion of these pupils who achieved the expected standard in writing at the end of key stage 2 was too low. In 2017, almost all pupils achieved the expected standard in writing, both at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. This is because you have focused successfully on improving the quality of teaching and making the curriculum more interesting and engaging for pupils. However, in 2017 too few pupils of middle ability achieved the higher standard in writing.
- Rates of progress in writing from all starting points are improving in all year groups, including those of middle ability. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities also make good progress, sometimes from very low starting points. However, where pupils have multiple barriers to learning, for example those who are disadvantaged and also have special educational needs and/or disabilities, progress is less strong.
- We looked at how well teaching builds on the strong start that pupils receive in the early years, especially in writing and mathematics. In 2016, too few pupils who achieved a good level of development went on to achieve at greater depth in these subjects by the end of key stage 1. However, progress this year has been better, because teachers have good subject knowledge and plan interesting lessons. Pupils respond well, showing positive attitudes to learning. They acquire skills well in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Outcomes at the end of Year 2 in 2017 are strong and improving. All pupils reached the expected standard in reading and mathematics, and almost all reached it in writing. Proportions of pupils achieving at greater depth are above those seen nationally in 2016 in reading, writing and mathematics. However, as with writing, too few pupils of average ability go on to achieve the highest levels at the end of Year 2, especially in mathematics.

- Another focus of the inspection was how well teaching and the curriculum enable boys to achieve as well as they could, especially in reading and writing. In 2016, boys achieved less well than girls at the end of the early years foundation stage, key stage 1 and key stage 2. In 2017, this difference has diminished considerably. You have made sure that the newly implemented curriculum appeals to boys' interests, enabling them to become more interested, engaged and successful learners. For example, pupils write about pirates and famous explorers while learning about the sea. Proportions of boys on track to achieve the higher level in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 2 in 2017 are much higher than in previous years. This is reflected in almost all year groups.
- During the inspection, there was clear evidence of boys being taught well and being enthusiastic and engaged in lessons, and proud of their school and their achievements. Many are highly articulate and can explain their learning with insight and clarity. By the time they leave the school they are independent, self-motivated, reflective learners.
- Only when work is too easy or too hard for them do boys drift off task and fail to concentrate well. This was highlighted in a maths lesson where the initial activity was something that the most able pupils, including several boys, could do easily. There was wasted time while they carried out this activity. There are too few opportunities for pupils, including boys, to apply their mathematical skills in reasoning and problem-solving. Where teachers do provide the activities, too few pupils show enough tenacity nor teachers the expectations that pupils will accomplish these activities to a high standard.
- Finally, we considered the levels of attendance and rates of persistent absence in the school. While rates of attendance overall are above those seen nationally, disadvantaged pupils' attendance has been too low for several years. School leaders have worked hard with external agencies, including social services, to help to improve the attendance of pupils with low attendance. While there have been some successes, there are also some pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils, whose attendance is still not good enough.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils of middle ability are supported to achieve the highest standards of which they are capable
- pupils are routinely challenged to apply their skills and deepen their understanding in mathematics
- rates of attendance improve further, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Bruce Waelend
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you, four members of the governing body and the school office manager. Telephone conversations were held with representatives of the local authority and the diocese. I spoke with teachers and teaching assistants during lessons and pupils in lessons and on the playground. I visited every class with you at least once and spoke to pupils about their work. I also spoke to pupils and staff at playtime. Together we looked at a range of pupils' work. I took account of 32 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 23 written contributions by parents. I spoke to several parents before and after the school day, including one who requested a meeting with me. I took account of 14 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 72 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and during break and lunchtimes. I looked at a range of documentation, including information about pupils' achievement; your school self-evaluation; the school improvement plan; and documents and checks relating to safeguarding.