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Mrs Wendy Millbanks
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Millbanks

Short inspection of Balcombe Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 31 October 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 last inspection. You and your team continue to demonstrate high levels of commitment to the pupils of Balcombe Primary School. You are determined that the school continues to improve by moving forward and going from strength to strength. Leaders are highly reflective. Improvements are carefully considered following consultation with governors, staff and pupils so that actions address the right things at the right times. Pupils are consulted and involved in these actions so that everyone is part of the drive for improvement. You work swiftly and effectively to address any occasional dips in performance. For example, following a drop in writing outcomes in 2016, leaders acted promptly, purchasing resources and renewing a focus on proofreading to check for writing accuracy. Consequently, standards in this aspect are rising quickly and strongly.

This is a school where pupils thrive and develop as confident, articulate learners. Pupils talk excitedly about the range of activities on offer, the support their teachers give them and the kindness of their fellow pupils. They relish the opportunities to work together and improve their school in school council meetings where every pupil is included. They radiate confidence in both learning well and in the adults who care for them. Parents, too, have very positive views. All parents who spoke to me or completed Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, felt their children were happy, safe and well cared for, with 100% happy to recommend the school. You have helped forge a strong community spirit, and families appreciate the warmth of

this small village school. One parent commented, 'I am so fortunate to send my children to a school where they are nurtured and respected as individuals' and another said that the school gives pupils 'the stability and encouragement to grow into confident young people'. Everyone upholds your high expectations for pupils' behaviour. Pupils blossom in the atmosphere of mutual respect that permeates every level of school life. Pupils are well mannered, thoughtful and happily engaged in learning and playing together. One parent encapsulated the views of many when describing the school as 'a little gem'.

Governors, together with you and other senior leaders, are highly effective, all contributing to the monitoring of the school's effectiveness. You also benefit from very positive support provided by the diocese and the local authority. These relationships, which you describe as 'honest and open' have created a strong sense of teamwork. Your collective monitoring of school performance is regular and accurate. As a result, pupils achieve well, and the quality of teaching and learning is consistently good. Your leadership team is involved in regular meetings to check on the progress pupils are making. However, you acknowledge that this process could be further enhanced by involving a wider range of leaders in assessing the quality of teaching and building on the strong sense of teamwork to share and develop teaching expertise.

You have maintained the strengths identified at the last inspection. Pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2 is in line with or above that seen nationally. Most pupils achieve the standards expected for their age and make at least expected progress from their starting points. Pupils achieve particularly well in reading, and more pupils attain the higher standard in reading at the end of key stage 2 than seen nationally. You are not complacent, however. You aspire to even higher standards so that more pupils attain the higher standards across the curriculum, especially in writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 1. You rightly recognise that writing opportunities could be further developed across the curriculum to support pupils in connecting areas of learning, developing skills in analysis, and constructing reasoned arguments.

You have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Pupils' mathematics books show regular opportunities to solve problems and develop their mathematical reasoning. Pupils are often able to explain very clearly why an answer cannot be correct, or why they have selected a particular answer. They use a range of equipment to show answers pictorially and demonstrate the mathematical processes they have gone through to arrive at an answer. As a result, progress in mathematics across the school has improved.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff keep a watchful oversight on all pupils. Because you know your pupils so well, any changes that might suggest a concern about pupils' well-being or safety are quickly noticed and explored. Pupils who need a little additional support from time to time are appreciative of the learning mentor and the time and care given to

them by staff which, they say, 'makes a real difference'. Pupils have an excellent knowledge of how to keep themselves safe. They benefit from involvement in regular safety days such as those on e-safety, and develop their understanding still further by activities such as creating a leaflet about e-safety for parents, based on the input.

The school's safeguarding policy is kept under regular review and adheres to the latest government guidance. All appropriate checks are completed on appointment of staff. Staff receive regular training and are aware of what to do if they have concerns about a pupil. The new system for recording concerns supports effective record-keeping. Governors make regular checks for themselves, talking to staff and pupils to satisfy themselves that procedures are clearly understood and consistent across the school.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements, pupils' achievement in writing, boys' progress in key stage 2, how well leaders ensure requirements are met, and the effectiveness of the teaching of science.
- You were disappointed with achievement in writing at the end of key stage 2 in 2016, when both attainment and progress were below levels seen nationally. Thorough analysis of pupils' writing enabled leaders to develop a clear action plan which has been effective in raising standards. The focus on proofreading has helped pupils to understand the importance of accuracy when writing. Books show clear development of skills over time across a range of genres.
- In the early years, a writing-rich environment supports children in writing for a range of purposes. Leaders are working with local playgroups to support improved fine-motor skills on entry to school to help children develop an improved pencil grip. Strong reading and phonics skills support pupils in crafting well-constructed sentences in key stage 1. For example, when writing questions for the book character Halibut Jackson, pupils used a range of question words, phonetically correct spellings and question marks.
- Pupils often have the confidence to write independently and accurately at a young age. In lower key stage 2, teachers are developing knowledge of the preceding and following years' curriculum to help ensure that expectations of writing, particularly for the most able, are consistently high enough. Progress data indicates that this is having a positive impact. However, leaders are not complacent and acknowledge that this remains an area of focus, particularly in developing writing skills across the wider curriculum.
- Girls made more progress and attained better than boys at the end of key stage 2 in both 2016 and 2017. Because of this, we looked closely together at the current progress of boys in key stage 2, and how well teaching and the curriculum supports their learning. Work in books, and progress information, shows that most boys make at least expected progress from their starting points over time. Boys told me that the curriculum engages and excites them, 'particularly when we do things outside like bug hunts and bubble experiments or make things such as the Roman shields'. The strong nurturing ethos of the school

ensures that 'pupil voice' is strong for all pupils and that they are active partners in their learning. Pupils told me that teachers explain things well to them, but that on occasion things could have a bit more challenge, 'Particularly if you are good at something'.

- At the start of the inspection, the school website had a few omissions, such as evaluating the impact of pupil premium spending and governors' attendance at meetings. The omissions were swiftly rectified. Governors fulfil their statutory obligations well. They have a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by a small school. They carefully evaluate the information provided for them by school leaders and use this to hold leaders effectively to account. They have a good overview of the curriculum and the development needs of the school.
- Governors work effectively with the local authority, parents, staff and pupils as well as school leaders. This ensures that their knowledge base is fulsome. The working relationship is honest and open, and clearly focused on improving provision and achievement for all pupils. Governors' visits to the school are appropriately linked to school improvement areas.
- In 2016, fewer pupils than seen nationally, in both key stage 1 and key stage 2, attained the expected standard in science. The curriculum has since been reviewed to ensure that all necessary scientific skills are taught. This provides pupils with the knowledge they need for the next stages of their education. Science trips such as the whole-school outing to the Science Museum, clubs, and events such as the much enjoyed 'bubble day', have ensured that pupils are engaged and excited by science. As a result, in 2017 standards were in line with the national average. However, leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to ensure that pupils' scientific understanding is fully developed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the role of middle leaders more fully involves them in assessing the quality of teaching and developing the professional skills of colleagues
- attainment is raised still further by ensuring that aspiration for all pupils, but particularly the most able, is consistently evident in writing opportunities across the curriculum and in regular opportunities to extend, connect and apply pupils' thinking.

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah Gordon
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, members of the governing body, staff, and a representative from the local authority. I reviewed documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, the school improvement plan, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. I observed pupils around the school and in their classes. Together, we visited all classes. In the classes I observed teaching, looked at books, and spoke to pupils about their work. I met with six pupils to get their views of the school. I took account of parents' views in the playground in the morning, and considered 32 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 24 free-text responses.