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4 December 2017

Mrs Sharon FitzGerald
Interim Executive Headteacher
Thurlow Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School
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Dear Mrs FitzGerald

Short inspection of Thurlow Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 November 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. There have been many changes to the school and leaders and governors have managed these changes well. Since the previous inspection the school has become part of a federation with Hundon Community Primary School. This provides opportunities for the two schools to share resources, staff expertise and best practice. The decision to admit three-year-olds to the early years has also been successful. This has enhanced and extended the excellent start children make in the high-quality early years provision, and offers the local community pre-school experience for families with young children.

Since you became interim executive headteacher in September 2017, you and your two deputy headteachers have identified quickly the main areas for improvement and acted decisively and effectively to manage them. You, your leaders and governors work very well as a team to ensure that pupils achieve well. The school continues to improve under your determined leadership. Governors share your ambition for pupils and they provide you and your leaders with good support and challenge to ensure continuous improvement.

Although the school has grown in numbers and extended the buildings, it retains the family feel of a smaller school. It is a calm and purposeful place to learn. This was evident in all classes and around the school, where adults and pupils were seen

happily working together. Pupils told me, 'This is a school where everyone is welcome. The grown-ups are really helpful.' This reflects pupils' views that they are well known by all adults and they feel well cared for.

Pupils behave exceptionally well and have very good attitudes to learning. This is because right from the start, adults make clear to pupils the school's expectations, for example reminding them to cooperate and to try their best. You and your team set out clearly your expectations of pupils as stated in the school's motto, 'Laying the foundations for a bright future', and pupils respond accordingly.

You have quickly gained the trust and respect of parents as an effective leader. The parents I spoke with, and those parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were full of praise for the quality of education that their children are receiving. They appreciate and value greatly the way in which teachers provide advice as to how they can support their children's learning. Among the overwhelmingly positive comments, parents described the school as being 'amazing' and 'fantastic'. One parent summed up the views of many by stating: 'This is a very welcoming school with excellent teachers. I feel the children get the best start to their education and the teaching is made fun and memorable.'

At the time of the school's previous inspection, the report noted many strengths, including well-planned teaching that matched the needs of all pupils. The report recommended that the quality of teaching in mathematics should improve to ensure that all pupils made strong progress in this subject. Since then, teachers and teaching assistants have received training and, as a result, their subject knowledge has improved. This has led to higher expectations and a consistent teaching approach across the school. Work in pupils' books shows that across all year groups there is an emphasis on securing basic mathematical skills and then using these to solve mathematical problems across a range of subjects. The most recent pupil-assessment information for 2017 shows that at the end of Year 6, pupils made stronger progress in mathematics than the previous year, and that standards are now at least in line with the national average.

You, governors and other leaders are not complacent and recognise that the school can be even better. You have identified clear priorities for development and are taking the right steps to achieve them through your focused improvement plans. Leaders, including governors, know that pupils' rapid progress will only continue if teaching is even better and expectations remain high. You are working with your leaders to secure these further improvements so that pupils continue to achieve well.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of keeping pupils safe. You and governors have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You work closely with other professionals and services to ensure that children and families receive timely and effective support. Thorough systems are in place for the recruitment and induction of new staff. The governor with

responsibility for safeguarding undertakes regular checks to ensure that safeguarding procedures are consistently applied. The training that staff receive means they are effective in recognising and responding to signs of concern.

Pupils feel safe in school and know how to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations, including when online. They have complete faith that adults in the school will listen to them if they have any worries. Pupils do not feel that bullying is an issue and told me that staff deal with any rare issues of poor behaviour firmly and fairly. Parents are also very confident that their children are safe and well looked after.

Inspection findings

- In order to check that the school remains good, I followed a number of lines of enquiry. First, I explored whether the good quality of teaching has been maintained since the previous inspection and whether pupils are achieving well from their starting points, particularly in key stage 2. This is because published assessment information varies considerably as cohorts in year groups are very small. I was interested to see what actions you have taken to ensure positive outcomes for your pupils.
- In your mixed-age classes, teachers' good understanding of what pupils know and can do ensures that teachers plan work that is suited well to pupils' different ages, needs and abilities. Teaching assistants are deployed well by the school. They provide effective support for all pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- You ensure that pupils are given the opportunity to reflect on teachers' comments and to identify what they need to do to make better progress. This enables pupils to be clear about how to achieve further success. Pupils told me that they appreciate the guidance they receive and that they 'try our best' so they can 'get better and have a good job in the future'. The quality and quantity of work in pupils' books, displays around the school, and the school's assessment information, indicate that the quality of teaching is typically effective over time.
- Another line of enquiry focused on how leaders are ensuring that pupils achieve well in writing. Leaders and governors were disappointed with pupils' outcomes in writing at the end of key stage 1 and 2 in 2017, as pupils achieved below the national average. While the results were skewed by the small number of pupils who undertook the assessments, you identified that some pupils had gaps in their writing skills and so were not able to apply these confidently when writing for different purposes.
- In response to these results, improving pupils' writing is a whole-school priority and you have provided additional training for all staff. In the early years, children were seen enjoying the many activities staff had planned to develop early writing skills. For example, a group of boys eagerly shared their story maps about 'The gingerbread man' and explained how the fox 'gobbled him up in one go!'
- In key stages 1 and 2, teachers and teaching assistants are now more confident about the national writing standards and what pupils need to do to achieve them. For example, they make sure that pupils have a clear understanding of the

features of different types of writing and how to plan and organise their work. Teachers consistently emphasise the importance of using correct grammar to pupils; this is helping pupils to improve their writing.

- Pupils are given opportunities to apply their writing skills when working in other subjects. For example, pupils produced some impressive instructions on how to make a water machine, and wrote detailed biographies about Vincent Van Gogh. Through tasks such as these, pupils across the school practise and extend their writing skills in different contexts and this contributes to the good progress they now make in writing.
- Finally, I considered how leaders make sure pupils have access to a broad and relevant curriculum that prepares them well for the next stage of their education. I also wanted to explore how well pupils make progress across subjects other than English and mathematics.
- From looking at teachers' plans and pupils' work it is clear that pupils enjoy a rich and exciting curriculum with lots of interesting and engaging opportunities for learning. Pupils take part in sports, learn a foreign language and experience a variety of visits outside of school. During the inspection, older pupils spoke excitedly about their joint residential trips with pupils from Hundon Community Primary School and how this gives them the opportunity to 'make new friends for secondary school'.
- Leaders acknowledge that the systems for assessing and recording the progress of pupils in some subjects, such as history and geography, are not yet firmly embedded. Consequently, some subject leaders are not able to identify clearly where pupils' progress is best and where it could be better. Subject leaders are therefore not taking enough responsibility for driving improvements in their subjects as rigorously as they could be. You have already included in your improvement plan that subject leaders need to capture and evaluate pupils' progress and outcomes accurately across all subjects.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- assessment systems in subjects other than English and mathematics are firmly established to ensure progress is closely tracked and any underachievement is quickly addressed to secure the best possible outcomes for all pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Webb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Meetings were held with you and one of your deputy headteachers. I also met with governors, including the chair of the governing body, and the local authority standards and excellence officer.

We discussed the key lines of enquiry for this inspection, the school's internal evaluation of its performance, plans for future improvement, and information about current pupils' progress and attainment.

I gathered a range of evidence to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This included joint observations of teaching and learning in classes with you.

We looked at a sample of pupils' current work across all subjects and across a wide range of abilities.

I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms about their learning, and met more formally with a group of pupils to talk about their school experience.

Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined, including mandatory checks made during the recruitment of new staff, and case studies about referrals made to external agencies. A discussion was held with you and one of your deputy headteachers, as the school's designated safeguarding leads.

The views of 12 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were taken into account, as well as the 10 responses parents made using the free-text service. I also considered the school's own recent parent survey, and the views of parents I spoke to during the inspection.