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Catherine O'Shea
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Dear Mrs O'Shea

Short inspection of St Michael's Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 13 March 2018, 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 October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have improved the effectiveness of the school through a period of change. At the same time, you have ensured that you have retained the charm and appeal that makes St Michael's a popular school with parents, carers and pupils alike. Parents I spoke to were very positive about the school. They value the fact they know their children so well as individuals and that you are always available for a quick chat. Parents really like the small, family feel of the school and know that their children are completely safe in your care. This was confirmed in the very positive response to the online questionnaire, Parent View. Indeed, many parents choose to travel to St Michael's from further afield because of the care and guidance you offer to your pupils and especially those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities.

You are open, honest and frank about the school's very many strengths and what you feel you could do even better. The nature of the school's small cohorts mean that it is not sensible or at times possible to draw conclusions about trends over time. Nonetheless, pupils make good progress from their starting points and are well prepared for the next stage of their education. This is because you ensure that your pupils get the best-quality teaching. You make effective use of continuing professional development, expertise within the school, and support from the local authority and other local schools. This helps to ensure that teaching meets the needs of all pupils and helps them to make good progress. Most pupils know what

they need to do to improve and understand why they now get less written feedback than they did in the past.

Reading is given a high priority in the school. The highly attractive and very well stocked library that was recently opened has given this key skill an even greater prominence in the school. Pupils are extremely proud of this new addition to the school, especially when, as one pupil explained, it is 'only 10 seconds from their classroom!' Although outcomes in reading are generally strong there was a dip in performance in recent years for the youngest pupils. Current pupils are making better progress. However, we agreed that sometimes greater care needs to be taken to help pupils choose appropriate books for their independent reading.

At the time of the previous inspection you were asked to improve teaching by challenging the most able pupils more. We saw examples of this in action in mathematics during my visit, where pupils were challenged to use their reasoning and problem-solving skills in mathematics. However, we agreed that reviewing the mathematics curriculum further may make this easier for teachers who currently teach two distinct mathematics topics at the same time to different year groups. This would help pupils to make even faster progress. You were also asked to develop the role of subject leaders. Subject leaders now play an important role in the monitoring of standards across the school and supporting their colleagues to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Your detailed knowledge of the community you serve and the fact that you know the pupils and their families so well contribute greatly to a strong safeguarding culture.

Staff receive relevant training in line with statutory requirements and know what to do if they have any concerns about a pupil's well-being. You and your team are particularly attuned to pupils' emotional well-being and mental health.

Although your work with other agencies to protect pupils is only needed infrequently, when it is required it is appropriate and professional. Records of your work to protect pupils from harm are up to date and usually of high quality.

Inspection findings

- Although there have been recent changes in the membership and leadership of the governing body, governors have continued to support and challenge you appropriately. This is because they have the appropriate skills and knowledge. However, on occasion, they accept what they are told without checking it out fully themselves or asking for further evidence. The recent support of a national leader of governance has enabled the new chair of governors very quickly to become effective in her important role.
- You have strengthened the impact that other leaders have across the school. The

SEN coordinator (SENCo) brings welcome expertise to the team and has helped reshape how pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are supported both in class and with additional activities. The leaders for English and mathematics now check the quality of teaching and standards across the school. They make a positive contribution to helping colleagues that need support to improve their practice. You know that leadership of the wider curriculum needs further development, and plan to collaborate with other local schools to work on this.

- At the start of the inspection we agreed to explore the recent dip in performance for the youngest pupils in reading and writing. As the inspection developed we widened its scope to look at reading more generally across the school. Children currently in Reception are developing their phonic skills well. Pupils across the school enjoy reading, and many of the oldest pupils choose a wide range of classical and modern children's fiction to read. While pupils do well in reading, not enough pupils reach the very highest standards by the time they leave the school.
- Teachers plan activities that are designed to develop pupils' skills as readers well in class. However, they do not pay close enough attention to what pupils read individually. There is a culture, sometimes perpetuated by competitive pupils and parents, to rush through the reading scheme and become a 'free reader' as quickly as possible. By the end of Year 2 a number of pupils are already designated as 'free readers', which means they get limited guidance about choosing appropriate books to read. As a result, the majority of pupils I heard read during the inspection had books that were too difficult for them. There were too many words they could not recognise or sound out using their phonic skills. This means that they do not truly understand what they have read and therefore their skills of comprehension, including the powers of inference and deduction, are underdeveloped.
- Pupils are proud of their writing, especially when it is about one of their topics such as 'The Great Fire of London'. Pupils make strong progress in improving the technical aspects of their writing, such as grammar and punctuation. However, the structure and content of their writing does not improve as quickly.
- There is a clear approach to teaching fluency, problem-solving and reasoning in mathematics. Teachers help pupils to make good progress in lessons through their careful guidance. The most able pupils have a range of challenging problems to solve and make sensible choices when organising their work. In mixed-age classes teachers sometimes teach two very different mathematics topics at the same time. This slows down learning. You recognise that a review of the mathematics curriculum could lead to preventing this and giving greater support and challenge to all pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- reading books that pupils take home are matched more closely to their abilities, and pupils are not moved on to the next stage too quickly
- they review the mathematics curriculum so it is organised in a way that ensures all pupils are able to make rapid progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Lee Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with the headteacher regularly throughout the day to talk about various aspects of the school's work. I also met with leaders for English and mathematics, and the SENCo. I visited each classroom with the headteacher to observe learning and talk to pupils about their work. I heard a sample of pupils from the Reception Year and Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 read, and spoke to them about their work. I met with the chair of governors and had a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. I spoke to parents before school and considered 43 responses to Parent View. I considered six responses to the confidential staff questionnaire. I scrutinised a range of school documentation, including documents relating to safeguarding, pupils' progress and governance.