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Ms Withers
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Withers

Short inspection of Ditcheat Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 24 October 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 December 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

You took up your post as headteacher in September. Since the last inspection there have been two changes of headteacher, and pupils' achievement has declined in key stage 2. The 2017 results show that key stage 2 progress in reading and mathematics was in the bottom two percent of all schools. School leaders and governors did not take effective enough action to halt the decline in 2016/17. However, changes have started to have an impact and the initial 2018 results show some improvement in both subjects, with a particular impact in reading. The records of governors' meetings show that they are now challenging leaders better and have a stronger awareness of how to interpret data. They are going to have an external audit to help them become more effective.

When the school was inspected in 2014, leaders were asked to raise the quality of teaching in several ways. These included making sure that teachers conveyed consistently high expectations for pupils' writing and their presentation skills. Pupils' books show that class teachers now expect good presentation and writing across the curriculum. Leaders were also asked to improve the challenge for the most able pupils in mathematics. This term, challenging problem-solving and reasoning activities are in evidence in pupils' books.

Since taking up your appointment, you have accurately identified the things the school needs to do to improve. You are ensuring that monitoring is regular and systematic. For example, you have introduced 'pupils' progress meetings' in order to keep a closer check on whether individuals are doing well enough. You are prioritising and being efficient with your monitoring, but you are not consistently taking opportunities to focus on individual disadvantaged pupils during wider monitoring activities. Though disadvantaged pupils make similar progress to others in the school, they typically make less progress than pupils nationally.

Staff and parents who gave their views have strong confidence in your leadership and vision. A parent wrote that you 'lead by example' and another wrote of you implementing 'well-needed changes'. Parents also praised the 'family feel' of the school and talked about their children flourishing. The pupils I spoke with told me they were happy. The behaviour I saw in lessons and around the school was good.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. Adults are vigilant, thoroughly committed and well trained in what to do should any problems arise. Records show that they follow through concerns with the local authority where needed. Leaders are aware of the wide range of risks to which pupils can be exposed, including being vulnerable to extremist views, and they take steps to reduce these risks.

Governors and senior leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. The single central record indicates that all required checks are made to ensure that staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children. Careful records are kept of training to make sure no staff member misses any training.

All of the pupils I spoke with said that they feel safe. Your school surveys and Ofsted's Parent View survey show that almost all parents feel their children are safe. Pupils say that other children are friendly. They understand what bullying is but say that it is rare and, if it occurs, teachers will sort it out quickly. The school gives strong attention to making sure that pupils know how to keep themselves safe, for example on the internet.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed that during my visit, as well as checking safeguarding, I would explore three particular aspects of the school. The first was to check how effectively the curriculum promotes teaching and learning, including in the mixed-age classes.
- The curriculum for the mixed Year 1/Reception class is well designed. Adults provide a carefully designed combination of work that is taught directly and learning through opportunities for play. These activities are adjusted according to pupils' ages and particular needs.
- Long-term plans show that teachers are providing a wide variety of experiences for pupils. These are very effective in stimulating pupils' enthusiasm and cover the national curriculum through things that are particularly relevant to pupils' backgrounds and interests. Some pupils spoke of particularly memorable experiences such as making mini carnival floats. One parent summed it up as 'learning by stealth'.
- Although the topic curriculum is very interesting to pupils, it does not always have sufficient depth to challenge them, particularly the most able. Planning helps pupils to make links across subjects but seldom encourages them to use the knowledge gained in one subject area to deepen knowledge in another. One exception to this is that pupils do draw on their topic knowledge in their writing work.
- The second focus area was pupils' progress in mathematics in key stage 2. I was interested in this because performance data about the school shows that it has been a weakness for the last three years.
- The school has made changes to the curriculum in mathematics. Pupils' current work shows that they are being taught to think about the underlying mathematics rather than simply to use a technique. Teachers ask probing questions and are alert to any pupils who need support. Pupils who may struggle are sometimes prepared by extra teaching before the lesson in order to help them keep up. They say this is useful.
- Despite these improvements in mathematics, Year 5 and Year 6 books show that pupils have gaps in their understanding of material that should be taught in previous years. This is still restricting their progress.
- My third and final focus area involved looking at the impact leaders are having on improving pupils' attendance. Overall absence levels were high compared to primary schools nationally in 2016 and 2017, and persistence absence was above average.
- Staff make sure that they know why individual pupils are absent, and they make sure that they are safe. However, the school does not give systematic attention to improving attendance. Attendance improved in 2017/18 to below average rather than low, but current data shows that some pupils whose attendance rose by the end of the year have fallen back. Governors have not paid enough attention to attendance figures. Opinions differ among parents and pupils as to whether they are allowed to take term-time holidays.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- achievement in mathematics in key stage 2 is improved, and pupils in the current Years 5 and 6 are systematically supported to fill gaps in their knowledge
- methodical attention is given to improving attendance, including through raising parents' awareness of the school's approach and the importance of good attendance
- the material taught through topics provides better opportunities for deeper knowledge and understanding, making sure that pupils gain and fully consolidate the knowledge that will be useful to them in the future
- while checking on different aspects of the school, every opportunity is taken to look at the performance and inclusion of disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah Zachary
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you to discuss your evaluation of the school and your plans for improvement. I visited all classes with you to observe learning and reviewed pupils' work in a sample of mathematics, English and topic books. I also met with the vice-chair of governors and one other governor.

I checked a range of documentation related to safeguarding and spoke with staff about their training and the actions they might take. I also talked with the designated leader for safeguarding about the school's procedures and how resulting actions are taken.

I spoke with a group of Year 5 and 6 pupils to seek their views of the school. In addition, I spoke with other pupils during lunchtime play. I spoke with 11 parents following a parents' forum meeting, and took account of the 22 responses and 15 written comments recorded on Parent View. I also considered the views of 11 staff and nine pupils, which were expressed in their questionnaires.