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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Claire Prynne
Headteacher
Upton St James Church of England Primary School
St James Road
Upton
Torquay
Devon
TQ1 4AZ

Dear Mrs Prynne

Short inspection of Upton St James Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 15 February 2019, 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 January 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your unwavering dedication, promoted through your vision of 'every child an able child', is impressive. You are ambitious on behalf of all pupils and do not tolerate excuses or allow complacency in the school's work. As a result, staff and pupils share a common understanding of the school's aims and ethos. Pupils are enabled to achieve well. They are academically, socially and emotionally well prepared for the next stage in their education.

You ensure that teachers have a good understanding of the needs of each pupil. Consequently, teachers implement well-planned sequences of work to improve pupils' skills and deepen pupils' knowledge and understanding. Lessons are exciting. These challenge pupils to think and reason through a range of different activities. For example, during the inspection, pupils in Years 5 and 6 were hiding under their tables, imagining what it would have been like during the Blitz. Teachers provide contexts to support pupils' emotional development and understanding. This, in turn, enables pupils to present high-quality work with meaning and intent as authors or composers. Parents also recognise the strengths of the school. In fact, 100% of parents who responded to Parent View would recommend Upton St James. Comments on the free-text survey for the inspection included, 'My son is happy at the school and is learning something new every day' and 'This is a fantastic school. My child has excelled after moving here...'

Since the previous inspection you have improved the school's tracking and

monitoring systems. Your tracking of pupils is rigorous and accurate. This enables you to hold teachers closely to account and improve the quality of teaching, including to raise standards for the most able pupils. However, the phonics strategy does not yet give the best possible start for all pupils with their early reading development, especially the disadvantaged and lower-attaining pupils. Furthermore, some inconsistencies in the quality of provision in the early years prevent children from being fully stretched and challenged when applying their learning through play and independently, including the most able. You are currently trialling ideas to investigate or consider how to ensure the best approach to benefit the children.

Safeguarding is effective.

You are tenacious and uncompromising in keeping pupils safe. This is seen, for example, in how you challenge external agencies and hold them to account. You work effectively with others and respond quickly when pupils need it. Your diligence, together with strong safeguarding arrangements, including appropriate training, ensure that staff are also assiduous and dedicated in looking after pupils.

Pupils say that they feel safe and trust school staff. They know what bullying is and report that this is very rare in the school. Through the online survey and in discussions with me, pupils said that teachers listen to them and do not accept bullying or behaviour which is derogatory to others. Pupils also know how to stay safe in different situations, including online, and how to evacuate the school safely. In addition, pupils understand how they can be proactive in helping each other. There are enthusiastic ambassadors, such as school councillors, eco-warriors and digital leaders, who contribute towards the safe and effective running of the school. Pupils understand the school 'charter' which sets out children's rights but also their responsibilities towards each other.

Inspection findings

- Due to very strong outcomes achieved by pupils in consecutive years, including in reading and mathematics, I examined the quality of writing with a focus on the most able boys. This confirmed that teachers have high expectations of all pupils. However, the proportion of boys reaching the highest standards remains a comparative weakness and, therefore, is a continuing challenge for leaders.
- A scrutiny of pupils' writing showed that pupils are motivated and enjoy writing. In particular, they are keen to experiment with adventurous word choices, vocabulary and ideas to hold the reader's attention. Boys are also experimenting in this way, building suspense and adding sophistication through different writing styles and strategies.
- The most able pupils also write at length for different reasons and in a range of genres, including fiction, narratives and non-fiction. However, at times, weaknesses in basic punctuation prevent pupils from being able to express their ideas fluently, which detracts from the overall effectiveness of the writing and their ability to write at greater depth.
- The school has a synthetic phonics programme in place. This is introduced from

the start of school and continues into key stage 1. The results in the Year 1 phonics screening check show steady improvement, and in 2018 the school's results were marginally above the national average. Leaders and teachers show an understanding of the significance of this in promoting early reading and writing. Furthermore, as a team (including governors and trust leaders), you recognise that this is an area that still needs strengthening. As such, you have set about improving phonics through a designated plan of action that corresponds with the school development plan.

- However, key aspects of the phonics strategy have become confused over time. This is seen in inconsistencies being taught in lessons, such as when adults mispronounce phonemes (sounds) or mix the teaching of phonemes with syllables. Consequently, pupils are not consistently acquiring the right skills and knowledge to help them with their early reading development, especially lower-achieving and disadvantaged pupils who need to catch up quickly.
- Furthermore, leaders and teachers do not have a strong enough understanding of the core principles of progression in phonics, or the steps for children to learn these. This further undermines some practice. For example, book boxes where pupils go to select books, have different schemes, with too much variation and a misguided sense of phonics progression. This means vulnerable pupils, including those who are behind and need to catch up, are not consistently reading the right books with the appropriate level of challenge.
- Teachers' use of assessment information in phonics is too variable. For example, teachers identify which pupils need further support and provide additional or different support accordingly. However, the next steps for these pupils are not consistently well sequenced to ensure that some pupils can catch up quickly.
- I also evaluated the effectiveness of provision and the quality of education in the early years, particularly for girls. The learning environment is lively with an appropriate range of activities so that all children feel encouraged and supported to learn through different activities and areas. As a result, children have freedom to make their own decisions and use their independence to integrate well. Children work well together, offering help to solve problems or complete tasks. Teachers and other adults work hard to establish an environment where the children feel valued and are happy working both inside and out. Teachers' assessments are accurate and used well to guide teaching and learning for the children.
- However, the range and quality of the activities provided in Reception are not consistently good enough to stretch the children when they are working independently, particularly the most able in reaching the highest standards in reading, writing and numbers. Leaders' intentions or expectations of the different activities and areas of learning in the environment are not well enough defined or understood. This means, at times, children are not challenged as well as they could be.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a consistently agreed and understood strategy for teaching phonics and reading is fully implemented in Reception and key stage 1
- teachers know and plan the precise next steps in phonics to enable any pupils who are behind to catch up quickly towards being confident and fluent readers
- the different activities in the Reception are of the highest quality to stretch and challenge children independently.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Exeter, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Torbay. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stewart Gale
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I worked extensively with the school improvement leader (SIL) from the trust to consider and evaluate a range of evidence brought about through different and agreed inspection activities. These were completed in line with the agreed key lines of evaluation. I checked the accuracy of teachers' assessments and records by comparing these to what pupils know, understand and can do, particularly in phonics. I also talked with pupils during lessons and breaktime. Additionally, I scrutinised safeguarding records and we discussed a wide range of related matters, including staff recruitment, training and vetting arrangements. I spoke with pupils and staff about their understanding of safeguarding procedures and the culture of safeguarding in the school. I also reviewed evidence of various referrals and communications with external agencies for safeguarding pupils.

I met with other staff, including teachers and subject leaders. I also met with representatives of the governing body, as well as two trustees of the trust. I reviewed school documents, including the school's self-evaluation summary and a sample of leaders' monitoring, including the headteacher's, governors' and SIL visits. I took full account of the 12 responses on Parent View as well as reviewing the free-texts received through the inspection.