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Mrs Stephanie Jarvis
Headteacher
St Helen's Church of England Primary School, Cliffe
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Dear Mrs Jarvis

Short inspection of St Helen's Church of England Primary School, Cliffe

Following my visit to the school on 4 June 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 November 2015.

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 staff make sure that the school's Christian values and ethos are reflected in all aspects of school life. The vast majority of parents who responded to the Ofsted survey, Parent View, particularly praised the school's community feel and noted how happy their children are to attend. Comments such as, 'The school has a real family and nurturing feel to it,' and, 'My daughter loves attending St. Helens. She feels safe, loved and part of a community,' are typical of the views expressed by parents during the inspection.

You and the deputy headteacher know the school well. You have taken effective action to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. Since the last inspection, there have been several changes in staff and the school has experienced some challenges in recruiting teachers. Leaders and governors have shown great resilience in tackling these difficulties. The staff team is now stable and morale is high. Teaching is exciting and engaging. Pupils' work shows a depth of understanding and demonstrates they are developing their skills across the curriculum.

Pupils are very proud of their school, and their attitudes towards learning are positive. Pupils persevere with tasks and show resilience when faced with more challenging work. They are polite and courteous and work well with one another, sharing resources and listening to each other's ideas. This was evident during the inspection, as the day was a whole-school 'outdoor learning' event. Pupils of all

ages, including early years, worked together to learn about their outdoor environment. They confidently shared their learning with others, and older pupils supported younger pupils in the development of their understanding. The task of composing letters to wildlife organisations, asking for help to develop the school's pond, gave real purpose to pupils' writing.

The consistent approach and high expectations of teachers mean that behaviour is managed well. Pupils are diligent, and their skills and knowledge are built up carefully. Pupils' behaviour, observed during the inspection, was good, both in and outside the classrooms. Pupils enjoy school and overall attendance is in line with the national average. Pupils say that they appreciate the extra-curricular opportunities available both during and after school. They told me that staff are friendly and caring, and help them with their learning.

Pupils' well-being has a high priority and pupils are provided with many ways to share any concerns or worries they may have with an adult. One pupil told me: 'There is always an adult who will listen to your worries and who will spend time with you.' The school uses many approaches to help pupils deal with their anxieties, including play therapy and a therapy dog, who is brought into school.

Improvement actions have addressed the areas for development identified in the last inspection. Firstly, appropriate actions have been taken to improve pupils' progress by the end of key stage 2, particularly in mathematics. In 2018, pupils' progress from the end of Year 2 to the end of Year 6 in reading, writing and mathematics had strengthened and was in line with the national average. Leaders have developed a bespoke approach to the teaching of mathematics, designed to address gaps identified in pupils' understanding. However, this approach has not yet been fully implemented in all classes across key stage 2.

Next, leaders have worked with the local authority to train subject leaders, developing their skills to ensure effective monitoring is taking place across the curriculum. At present, you and the deputy headteacher are leading English and mathematics as a result of the staff changes since the last inspection. However, plans are now in place to distribute the leadership of these core subjects, and to support new and existing middle leaders to develop their leadership skills further.

Finally, although you have raised teachers' expectations of the most able pupils, the progress and attainment of this group, including the most able disadvantaged, remains below national figures. This continues to be a priority for improvement.

Following a period of turbulence, the governing body has strengthened its knowledge of the school and now holds leaders robustly to account for the school's performance. Governors gather a breadth of information through their visits, reading leaders' reports and analysing performance information. They offer leaders appropriate support but also challenge by asking probing questions about aspects of the school's work. As a result, governors have an accurate view of the school's strengths and areas for continued improvement. Governors are passionate about ensuring that all pupils receive high-quality education.

Safeguarding is effective.

Parents, staff and pupils agree that the school keeps pupils safe. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe, including when online. They learn how to recognise bullying, know how to deal with it and who to talk to.

All staff have had up-to-date safeguarding training and are aware of current legislation. They understand their safeguarding responsibilities and duties. Leaders are knowledgeable and sensitive to the needs of the families and communities the school serves. Leaders are diligent in ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of pupils. They work in collaboration with external agencies to ensure that pupils receive the help they need. Records of this aspect of the school's work are detailed and kept securely.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed three lines of enquiry. The first explored leaders' actions to improve pupils' attendance, including that of pupils who are persistently absent. While pupils' attendance over time has been broadly similar to that found nationally, the level of persistent absence has been high.
- Leaders, including governors, have rightly prioritised improving attendance. They are robust in challenging and supporting families to ensure that pupils attend regularly. Strategies have included more effective working relationships with individual families and outside agencies. These have resulted in reduced rates of persistent absence this year that are now below the national average.
- The second line of enquiry looked at how well current pupils progress in reading, writing and mathematics from their above-average starting points at the end of early years. Leaders have monitored this progress for some time but have only recently shared this information with teachers. Teachers increasingly understand their accountability for ensuring that all pupils make good progress from their early starting points.
- Teachers use challenging and inspirational texts to ensure that pupils develop as confident readers. As a result, pupils are motivated readers who become familiar with a range of authors and genres. Pupils' understanding of more-complex writing techniques is developing well. They show confidence in their use of rich vocabulary when writing. The development of handwriting and high expectations for the presentation of work have been priorities for the school. The impact of this is clear in the high-quality presentation of pupils' work.
- Leaders identified the need to raise standards in mathematics, making it a priority for the school's development. This has resulted in a focus on the development of arithmetic skills, alongside more opportunities for pupils to solve problems and apply mathematical reasoning.
- Current pupils are making good progress across the curriculum, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics. This was evident in pupils' books and in the work on display.
- The third line of enquiry focused on leaders' actions to strengthen the progress in reading, writing and mathematics made by the most able pupils, including the

most able disadvantaged. This focus was because most-able pupils have been making slower progress than other groups. In addition, disadvantaged pupils have not been attaining the higher standards in reading, writing or mathematics at the end of key stage 2.

- Leaders have worked well to develop staff's knowledge and confidence through a range of professional development opportunities. The subject leaders for English and mathematics have successfully introduced new approaches to address identified gaps in skills at the higher standard.
- The whole-school approach to the teaching of higher-order reading skills and the use of high-quality texts across the curriculum are beginning to have an impact. The progress of current most-able pupils in reading and writing is strengthening.
- Pupils' mathematics books show that most year groups are rapidly developing mathematical-reasoning and problem-solving skills. There is considerable evidence to show that current most-able pupils, including the disadvantaged, are being appropriately challenged. As a result, the majority of the most able pupils are making good progress to meet the requirements of the higher standard.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle leaders are further developed so that some of the responsibilities of senior leaders can be distributed to others
- teaching and learning in mathematics is consistently strong across the school and has an appropriate focus on reasoning and problem-solving
- teachers provide sufficient challenge for the most able pupils so that a larger proportion, particularly the disadvantaged, reach the higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the co-chairs of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Rochester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Medway. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Marcia Goodwin
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher. I also met with five governors, with a representative of the local authority and had a telephone conversation with a representative of the diocese. I carried out short observations of teaching, looking at pupils' work in books and on display. You joined me on most

lesson observations. I talked with pupils during my visits to classrooms and also met with a small group to gather their views about school life and work. I looked at several documents, including the school's own evaluation of its performance, the school improvement plan and minutes of the governing body's meetings. I also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. By the end of the inspection I had considered 78 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 64 free-text comments. I took account of 15 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 24 responses to the pupil questionnaire.