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Mr Russell Leigh
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Leigh

Short inspection of Dorchester St Birinus Church of England School

Following my visit to the school on 11 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 December 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. As headteacher, you provide clear-sighted and purposeful leadership to drive forward improvements. You, your staff and governors are very ambitious for the pupils in your care. You have an accurate understanding of the school's overall performance and the standards achieved by pupils. This is because you have a range of well-understood processes for checking what is happening in school.

All staff and governors are working hard to live up to the school's vision, 'inspiring one another to be the best we can be as a learning community'. Staff morale is high and there is a strong sense of teamwork that permeates the school. All members of staff who responded to the staff questionnaire agreed that the school is well led and managed. You and your staff at all levels share a passion for successfully providing a curriculum that develops pupils' life experiences. You have developed a school culture which is positive, calm and aspirational for all pupils.

Throughout my visit, pupils were welcoming, polite and well mannered. Pupils collaborate well in lessons and show respect for all the adults that work with them. Pupils are proud of their school, describing it as 'fun', 'friendly' and 'homely'. There are high levels of pastoral care that enable pupils to learn together and thrive. One pupil told me: 'Our teachers are lovely and really helpful. We all work hard together.'

At the time of the last inspection inspectors highlighted good teaching, strong and supportive challenge from governors and effective systems to check on pupils' progress. These aspects remain strengths. Inspectors asked you to improve pupils' achievement in reading by emphasising the importance of regular reading at home and encouraging parents to listen to their children reading at home. Your work in this area has been effective, and pupils talked enthusiastically about reading. You and your staff have created a reading strategy which promotes a love of reading and sets challenges for all children to aspire to. Pupils told me how they are encouraged to read widely, exploring a range of genres and authors. As a consequence, you are ensuring that more pupils are making better progress, and achieving higher standards, in reading.

You and your staff are proficient in identifying how to improve pupils' progress. Pupils make good progress overall in reading, writing and mathematics, but there are inconsistencies in the quality of challenge in some classes, particularly for the most able. You have correctly identified that teaching needs to be more challenging in order for pupils to make more progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, together with governors and the wider community, share a strong and effective culture of safeguarding in the school. Working together, you have made it a priority to create a safe and secure environment in which for pupils to learn and play. For example, the pupils told me that the new school gates help protect them from harm and keep them safe.

Record-keeping is detailed, and all actions are followed up meticulously. Precise and detailed procedures ensure that school staff are properly vetted before they work at the school. All school staff receive timely and good-quality training to ensure that they are confident in applying the school's policies and guidance in relation to child protection. There are effective relationships with other agencies to ensure that pupils are safe and well looked after.

You encourage your pupils, and know them well. They are proud to be part of the 'Dorchester St Birinus community'. As a result, the vast majority of parents who completed the online questionnaire agree that their children are well cared for and feel safe. One parent commented: 'A very special school, where each child seems to be well known to staff, and where everyone is encouraged to grow in confidence.'

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection we agreed to look at the effectiveness of safeguarding, how effectively you have improved the progress of most-able pupils in mathematics, the teaching of reading, and the progress pupils make in writing at key stage 2.
- My first line of enquiry focused on the progress of most-able pupils in mathematics. In 2016 and 2017 the proportion of pupils that achieved the higher scores in mathematics at key stage 1 was below the national average, and pupils'

progress in key stage 2 had declined. Leaders reorganised the mathematics curriculum and raised expectations among the staff. Teachers have devised a greater range of tasks that focus on developing pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills. These activities are encouraging pupils to develop their mathematical skills, knowledge and understanding. For example, in a mixed Year 1 and 2 class pupils were using their knowledge of multiplication and fractions to work out written problems. In 2018, the proportion of pupils that achieved the higher scores at key stage 1 and key stage 2 was above the national average.

- Current pupils' books illustrate that regular problem-solving activities now form a part of the mathematics work to help pupils apply their understanding to real-life contexts. You and your team have identified that further work is needed to challenge the most able pupils in mathematics, and to enable them to have a deep understanding and reach high standards.
- We examined ways in which you had developed writing. In 2017, pupils' progress in writing had decreased from previous years. Leaders subsequently reorganised the writing curriculum and raised expectations among staff. Your staff have selected a range of topics that enthuse pupils, inspiring them to want to write, and pupils told me that they love their 'big writing' sessions. Pupils are now making stronger progress because teachers have put these higher expectations into practice.
- You are working to improve further the attendance of pupils, including meeting with parents when their children's attendance has been poor. Records show that, because of your actions, the proportions of pupils who are persistently absent has fallen. Despite this, progress to improve overall attendance is slow, and you are far from satisfied that overall attendance is below the national average. You are continuing to work sensitively with families so that pupils can attend more regularly and maximise their time at school.
- At the time of the last inspection reading was identified as an area for improvement, and you have worked hard to increase the progress pupils make. You use a range of strategies to develop pupils' reading skills for meaning and comprehension, for example the 'Dorchester St Birinus kung fu' reading programme is resulting in a greater number of pupils achieving the expected standards at key stage 1 and key stage 2. The teaching of phonics is effective and is leading to pupils becoming confident, fluent and expressive readers.
- You have given thoughtful consideration to planning the curriculum so that pupils acquire skills and knowledge across a range of subjects. Staff provide pupils with the chance to explore the world around them. These experiences help to improve their reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils told me they enjoy the range of topics that they study, for example the history of the local community, the forest school, and countries around the world. The curriculum is enhanced by extra-curricular clubs, including drama, choir and hockey. These contribute to pupils' well-rounded education.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils' rates of progress in mathematics improve further, particularly for the most able
- pupils' attendance improves and reaches at least in line with the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

David Harris
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and your staff. We considered the improvements which have been made since the last inspection. Together, we undertook observations of learning in lessons. I examined pupils' work, focusing on mathematics and writing. I held a meeting with three governors, including the chair of the governing body. Before the inspection, I examined a variety of documents, including the school's website, published performance information, and a summary of your school's self-evaluation document. I took account of 34 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 20 written comments. I also considered 11 responses to Ofsted's staff survey and the nine responses to the pupil questionnaire. A range of documentary evidence was evaluated, including documents relating to safeguarding and governance.