

5 July 2019

Mr Chris Dodge
Headteacher
The Wells Free School
King Charles Square
Tunbridge Wells
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Dear Mr Dodge

Short inspection of The Wells Free School

Following my visit to the school on 18 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 May 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Leaders and governors have a well-established vision, which is based on the founders' four key principles of well-being, community, purposeful learning and inclusion. Their shared view has informed decisions effectively during a period of instability which has included changes to the school's premises and staffing. As a team, you have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Staff enjoy working at the school and, together, you have the trust of parents and carers to improve the school further.

Governors have conducted an audit to ensure that their knowledge of the school's effectiveness is up to date. They have attended a wide variety of training courses on governance and new governors have been recruited to the team. However, governors have recognised the need to revise the layers of governance and ensure that school leaders are challenged routinely. This is being addressed currently.

With leaders, you have devised a comprehensive development strategy and a clear system for reviewing the school's work. Plans identify specific actions and define ambitious targets. Progress against the school improvement plan is reviewed regularly to ensure that resources are targeted effectively to raise standards further. Although, pupils' progress is in line with the national averages in reading, writing and mathematics, you have identified the need to strengthen achievement further in writing and mathematics.

The last inspection identified strengths in leadership, teaching, the wider curriculum,

and the early years. These strengths have been maintained. The need to ensure that pupils show positive attitudes to learning was an area for improvement from the previous inspection. Staff work hard to ensure that lessons are stimulating and pupils appreciate the fact that teachers make learning fun. Pupils' learning is linked increasingly to first-hand experiences. Leaders have made pupils' mental health a priority and counselling support is provided for those facing difficult challenges. Pupils talk confidently about how staff help them learn. Pupils work well together and have opportunities to practise new skills. Accordingly, pupils are attentive in lessons and, as a result, most are making strong progress.

Leaders have designed a varied curriculum, and it is refined constantly to ensure that all pupils develop academically, creatively and socially. Pupils welcome the real-life learning experiences that are chosen carefully to support their learning. For example, Year 6 pupils visit the Museum of Kent Life when studying the Second World War and Year 2 pupils walk around their local town when learning about different types of housing. Pupils learn about the Saxons when creating Celtic jewellery and find out about other beliefs and cultures when studying mosques and Hindu temples. One parent wrote, 'The school is encouraging them to do well, but also to be a decent human being in the process.'

During visits to all classrooms, we saw pupils engaged in a range of exciting activities. Children in Reception used sponges to print pictures of caterpillars and then discussed the features of caterpillars that deter predators. Inspired by their class text, pupils in Year 3 developed their persuasive writing skills as they tried to convince their mothers 'that there are wolves in the walls'. Year 1 pupils were observed playing a game to practise their phonics skills. Pupils discuss their learning and are keen to share ideas with their teachers. Staff ask questions to help pupils move forward in their learning and to identify and address misunderstandings. As a result of strong teaching, most pupils are making good progress.

This is an inclusive school. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported to play a full part in the life of the school. This help is appreciated by many parents. All pupils are cared for as individuals and, where necessary, modifications are made to the timetable and extra equipment is provided. Leaders work closely with pupils and their families to ensure that they get appropriate support. Pupils enjoy school. They talk happily about the experiences provided. Pupils are well-mannered and respectful of one another when sharing their views. They behave well in class and around the school.

Pupils participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities. They like taking part in ballet lessons, art club, dodgeball, cricket and attending the after-school childcare provision. Pupils in the choir have the chance to perform at the O2 Arena. The school's site has restricted outdoor space. However, pupils take part in competitive events and have lessons, such as athletics, at other local schools. One parent commented: 'The school strikes an excellent balance between teaching the required curriculum and developing well-rounded human beings. There are lots of enrichment opportunities available for pupils.' These extra activities contribute successfully to pupils' progress and promote their personal development.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose. Pupils' well-being is a focus for the school, in line with the founders' key principles. Leaders make sure that comprehensive records are kept and that these are reviewed frequently. Staff take part in regular training and understand the importance of keeping pupils safe. Staff know what action to take if there are concerns and that all issues need to be followed up promptly. Leaders work well with a variety of external organisations to ensure that pupils and their families get appropriate help when needed.

Leaders recognise that communication with parents is a priority. 'School experience mornings' give parents the chance to work alongside their children in class. The school's website contains a range of useful information, including details about staying safe online, healthy eating and hygiene. Parents welcome the fact that meetings with teachers are scheduled in advance and that the homework provided supports their children's learning. The majority of parents who completed Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, are happy that their children are well looked after and safe in school. Most parents find staff welcoming and feel that leaders take issues raised seriously.

Pupils are taught how to be safe. They speak confidently about fire drills, lockdown procedures and how to stay safe when using the internet. Children in Reception wore hard hats as they played with the large building equipment. Pupils say that they are happy to talk to staff if they have a problem. They know that staff will take them seriously. Pupils explained how they can write concerns on to speech bubbles and that staff talk to them quietly when helping to resolve a problem. Bullying and racism are rare. As one boy stated, 'Discrimination does not happen at this school.' However, leaders have systems in place to take appropriate action should any form of unkindness occur. Pupils are safe and the majority of pupils state that they feel safe.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we agreed to focus on: the progress of pupils, including the disadvantaged, in mathematics at key stage 2; how successfully leaders are ensuring that pupils fulfil their potential in writing, with a particular focus on boys in key stage 2; and how successfully pupils learn phonics in key stage 1.
- Leaders have reviewed the teaching of mathematics across the school. Staff have undertaken a range of training and have had the opportunity to work alongside each other in class. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, are given additional opportunities to explain their mathematical reasoning and to solve problems. Year 5 pupils enjoy finding coordinates as they translate two dimensional shapes on a grid. Year 3 pupils were observed solving problems with fractions and writing careful explanations of their mathematical thinking. Pupils enjoy mathematics and appreciate the opportunities to work together and share ideas. Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and pupils learn technical

mathematical vocabulary systematically. This was illustrated when one boy was challenged to define an irregular pentagon and other pupils added extra detail to clarify the definition. As a result, most pupils in key stage 2, including the disadvantaged, make strong progress in mathematics. However, staff need to ensure that all pupils are challenged consistently to achieve their full potential in mathematics.

- Leaders have introduced a structured, sentence-based approach to the teaching of writing. All pupils develop their writing skills progressively. They are encouraged to learn new literacy skills and vocabulary, from published authors and by sharing good practice. Pupils welcome the way that staff link their writing tasks to exciting texts they are reading as a class. Year 4 pupils use 'the iron man' by Ted Hughes to develop and extend their vocabulary. Other pupils practise using speech punctuation when writing dialogue between characters, developing their empathy and understanding of the characters at the same time. Pupils draft and redraft their writing in a range of genres. Most staff provide guidance and ask questions that require pupils to think more deeply. Pupils enjoy writing and take pride in their work. Most pupils, both boys and girls, make strong progress. Nonetheless, as leaders agreed, there is more to be done to ensure that all key stage 2 pupils are challenged sufficiently and attain the standards they are capable of.
- Reception children get off to a good start in developing their knowledge and skills in phonics. In key stage 1, staff have similarly high expectations. All adults have strong subject knowledge and teach letters and sounds systematically, using technical vocabulary. As a result, pupils are familiar with such terms as 'digraph' and 'trigraph'. Pupils take part in a range of stimulating activities that help them learn and apply their phonics. Year 1 pupils practise sounds as they throw and catch a balloon. While in Year 2, pupils use their skills to decode a selection of nonsense words. Pupils use their knowledge of letters and sounds in their reading and writing. Consequently, pupils in key stage 1 make strong progress in phonics and the outcomes of current Year 1 pupils are broadly in line with the national averages.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils are challenged consistently to make sure that all key stage 2 pupils achieve their full potential in writing and mathematics
- layers of governance are restructured to make sure that school leaders are challenged routinely.

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

Yours sincerely

Rosemary Addison
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, senior leaders, the chair and vice-chair of the governing body and spoke on the telephone to a representative of the trustees. I also met a group of pupils from Years 1 to 6. With you, I visited all classrooms at least once, where I observed learning, spoke to pupils and looked at their work. A range of writing and mathematics books were scrutinised with senior leaders. I observed pupils' behaviour in classrooms and around the school. I took account of the 73 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 39 free-text comments. I also considered the 19 responses to the staff survey and the 67 responses to the pupil questionnaire. A range of documentation was examined, including: the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan; information on the school's website; safety records; minutes of meetings; various policies and information about pupils' progress.