

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs Claire Frost
Headteacher
Wittersham Church of England Primary School
The Street
Wittersham
Tenterden
Kent
TN30 7EA

Dear Mrs Frost

Short inspection of Wittersham Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 22 June 2016, 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 March 2012.

This school continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, the school went into something of a decline. While national standards rose, in school they stayed much the same from year to year. Children's achievement in the Reception Year was below average for several years, and achievement in mathematics at the end of key stage 2 fell sharply last year. Alarm bells rang and the local authority intervened to strengthen leadership. You were seconded to the school from a national support school and have subsequently been appointed as the substantive headteacher. The local authority provided support in the early years prior to the arrival of the early years leader who started at the school in January.

Since arriving at the school last September, you have provided real clarity of purpose, dynamism and direction. You have raised the game of pupils, governors and staff. Parents at the start of the day and many of those who responded in writing singled you out for particular praise. 'I am very impressed with our new headteacher. She has hugely improved the school for the better in such a small space of time', and 'Mrs Frost has brought a feeling of joy and excitement to the school since she became head', are representative of the comments. You have sought and included the views of staff, governors, parents, pupils and the community in rebranding the school and identifying its unique vision and values. These values are evident not just on paper but also in practice throughout the school.

You have implemented accurate assessment and rigorous tracking to identify weaknesses relating to adults' performance and the underachievement of individuals and groups of pupils. You have improved the quality and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils' achievement is rising rapidly, particularly in the early years and in upper key stage 2. The quality of leadership at senior and subject level is better and several leaders are now making an increasingly valuable contribution to the rapid rate of improvement. Governors are also improving their effectiveness and their work is supported by the high quality of information provided by you. They are not completely reliant on you, however, and are fully involved in monitoring and evaluating the impact of the school's improvement plan through sharply focused visits. You have achieved the difficult task of challenging long-established practices and improving the quality of education while retaining and further developing the school's strong sense of community and positive relationships.

You know that the pupils have the potential to achieve even more and are determined to raise everyone's, including the pupils', expectations about the quality and the quantity of their work. You are also aware that the focus this year has been on making sure that pupils achieve as well as possible in English and mathematics. As a result, although pupils experience all subjects, including French and a wide range of physical activities, there is scope to raise the quality and depth of their learning across a wider range of subjects, including science.

Safeguarding is effective.

All parents, staff and pupils who responded to the surveys believe that pupils are safe, well looked after and happy in school. There are robust systems for checking to make sure that staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children. All staff and governors have received up-to-date training on safeguarding issues, including the most recent guidance on aspects such as ensuring that pupils are safe from extremism. There are comprehensive induction arrangements for adults who join during the year so that they understand the school's systems and their responsibilities and know key staff. Governors carry out their responsibilities through making regular checks and health and safety visits. There have been recent improvements to the perimeter fencing and security systems around school.

You, and other staff, are highly visible, especially at the beginning of the day. Parents welcome these informal opportunities to talk to you and to raise any concerns if necessary. Records for individual pupils show that systems to raise and record concerns are secure and there is appropriate involvement and liaison with outside agencies. Pupils are confident that the adults in school will help them when necessary. Pupils' conduct is exemplary and there are no concerns about bullying. There are high levels of supervision at playtimes and lunchtime. Playtimes are well ordered and organised so that pupils play safely and enjoyably. Pupils enjoy school and attendance is high.

Inspection findings

- Staff are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school. They are proud to belong to the school, feel well supported and share high expectations of learning, behaviour and attitudes. The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved this year and all staff, including teaching assistants, make a valuable contribution to pupils' increasing achievements.
- There is strong evidence in lessons and in pupils' books that attainment and progress are improving rapidly across the school. Pupils' reading skills are particularly strong. Throughout the school, there is evidence of high-quality writing. Pupils take a pride in their work and are confident to tackle challenges. They respond to teachers' feedback and the resulting improvements in their work are obvious.
- Writing was an area identified for improvement in the previous inspection and this has been addressed. There are many examples of high-quality writing across the school in books and on display. Older pupils include complex ideas, sophisticated vocabulary and literary techniques in their writing. During the visit, Year 3 pupils were keen to share their story endings written in the style of a book they are reading together in class. Their writing showed a good understanding of the characters and setting, and included suitably descriptive vocabulary. However, the quantity of writing was rather limited and more could have been expected and achieved.
- One of the six key priorities this year has involved raising standards in mathematics. Improving subject leadership is supporting colleagues to deepen their mathematical subject knowledge. As a result, the increased demands of the revised mathematics curriculum are covered effectively.
- There is a sharp focus on deepening pupils' understanding of mathematical ideas and increasing their recall of mathematical facts. Pupils make good use of regular opportunities to discuss their learning, to explain their thinking and solve problems. Adults model good use of mathematical vocabulary in their explanations and questioning. For example, a group of younger pupils were encouraged to use words such as longer and shorter to compare the length of different objects to a giant's footprint. Older pupils were able to explain why one of the diagrams supposedly showing symmetry was incorrect. Year 4 and Year 5 pupils showed a good understanding of positive and negative numbers during a quick-fire warm-up session. As a result, there is good evidence in mathematics lessons and in books that mathematics is no longer a weakness in the school.

- In Year 1, pupils who did not achieve a good level of development by the end of Reception have made good progress. For example, almost all have achieved the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics (the sounds that letters represent) screening check. Changes to the school's approach to teaching phonics and early literacy have made a difference. You identified that, in the past, letters and sounds had been taught incorrectly, so that some pupils were finding it difficult to blend sounds together to read unfamiliar words and spell words. Intensive support is being provided to help these pupils use their grasp of phonics quickly and correctly.
- Improvements in the quality of teaching and provision in the early years mean that the youngest pupils are achieving much better than in the past. A much higher proportion have already achieved the knowledge and skills typical for their age than has been the case in previous years. The classroom and outside area are vibrant. There are interesting activities covering all the different areas of learning. The teacher and teaching assistants work well together in making links across different activities, building on and sparking children's interests.
- During the inspection, activities were related to stories about giants and castles. For example, children explored the capacity of different containers by mixing magic potions, making collages of the giant's face, comparing the length of different objects to the giant's footprint and writing a diary entry about the giant's day using time connectives such as 'before', 'after' and 'later'. Activities are planned well and provide different levels of challenge.
- Progress in key stage 1 is less pronounced than in the early years and key stage 2. For example, reading is a strength everywhere except in Year 2 where some intensive support is helping pupils make up some lost ground from earlier in the year. Some of these pupils had gaps in their knowledge and skills which are being plugged now, and additional support is making a positive difference.
- The pupils' science books show that although they are learning about scientific ideas, there are not enough opportunities for pupils to develop enquiry and investigation skills and scientific writing. In addition, some of the work in the books suggests that the pupils are not challenged in science in the same way as they are in English and mathematics.
- The plan for using the pupil premium funding and evaluating its effectiveness is much more sophisticated this year than in the past. There are very small numbers of disadvantaged pupils, which makes comparisons difficult. However, gaps between their achievement and that of other pupils are small. In many cases, disadvantaged pupils achieve as well or better than other pupils in the school and other pupils nationally. In the few instances where this is not the case, pupils have particular complex needs.

- Parents are informed regularly about how well their children are achieving. Those who responded to the Parent View survey were overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school and 100% of them would recommend the school to others. As well as parent workshops about the early years curriculum and phonics, parents also send in 'wow coins' which contribute to the records of the youngest children's achievement and progress.
- The sports funding has been used well to increase pupils' participation in a wider range of physical education activities and to promote involvement in inter-school sporting events. Pupils responding to the survey were positive about the opportunities for them to take part in a variety of clubs and activities such as sports, music and gardening.
- There is a very positive ethos in school. Pupils contribute to this by their good behaviour, courtesy and friendliness. They demonstrate the school values in practice. Alongside school values, pupils are supported to understand and respect differences in beliefs, and take responsibility and persevere.
- Promoting a better understanding of cultural diversity was an area for improvement at the previous inspection. This has been addressed thoroughly through the curriculum and visits, including visits to France, a Sikh temple and to towns and cities that contrast with the small village of Wittersham. You are making sure that the school is outward looking and ambitious to become even better.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement continue to improve by raising expectations even more of the quality and quantity of pupils' work
- the quality of pupils' work and the depth of learning improves across subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the assistant headteacher, the mathematics leader, the chair of the governing body and the governor who has responsibility for safeguarding. An improvement adviser from the local authority joined us for the feedback meeting. You and I visited all of the classes during the day to observe the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in mathematics. We also looked at the pupils' books, including some from disadvantaged pupils. I took account of 16 staff questionnaires, 44 responses to the online survey, Parent View, and 70 responses to the pupil questionnaire. I also looked at a recent school survey of parents' views. I spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day. I had lunch with pupils. I looked at a range of the school's documentation, including information about pupils' achievement and attendance, safeguarding checks, and policies and procedures. I also looked at, and discussed with you, the evaluation of the school's effectiveness and the current improvement plan.