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Dear Mr Lloyd

Short inspection of Steeple Morden CofE VC Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 December 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 February 2012.

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 the school's governors have tackled the areas for development from the last inspection well. As a result, outcomes for pupils in mathematics have improved and the leadership of the school is stronger. There is still work to do to raise outcomes in writing and to improve tracking of the progress pupils make. However, it is clear that Steeple Morden is a good and improving school.

You and the other leaders have created a school where everyone is valued and where pupils behave well and do their best. Pupils show excellent attitudes to equality and discrimination because this is what is modelled to them routinely by staff. They are very well aware of what is acceptable and what is not.

Pupils behave very well and the school is a calm and orderly place. You know all the pupils individually. This was clearly evidenced on our tour of the school by the carefully chosen questions you asked some pupils and the well-tailored words of encouragement you gave to others. Parents and pupils alike appreciate your personal touch. One parent said that you are 'an excellent headmaster' and that your leadership 'has created a happy and rewarding school, which leads to happy, smiling children'.

Pupils show good attitudes to learning and are interested in what they are taught. For example, in one class, pupils were keen to talk about their work on Shakespeare. They were able to name their favourite plays and to justify their choices. Pupils' enthusiasm for the topic was clearly demonstrated in their high-quality homework projects, such as a beautifully constructed model of the Globe Theatre. Year 5 pupils were excited and motivated by their project to send a weather station 'into the stratosphere'. They talked knowledgeably about how they would do this, following their visit to a major retailer's drone laboratory.

Parents show high levels of satisfaction with the school. Every one of the 47 parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, would recommend the school to others. Every parent completing the survey said that they felt that their children are safe at school and none expressed concerns about bullying. Parents appreciate the ethos of the school and the dedication of the staff. One parent echoed the thoughts of many by saying, 'The staff at Steeple Morden Primary School are dedicated, caring and dynamic individuals who really listen to children and parents and who always go that extra mile for each and every child. I feel so lucky that my children are able to attend such a fantastic school.'

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. As the school's designated safeguarding lead, you have very good knowledge and understanding of your responsibilities. You are fully prepared to take whatever action is necessary to protect the children in your care. It is clear that when you say 'I would make myself a pain' in order to get the right help for pupils, this is exactly what you would do. Records of child protection concerns are detailed and well kept.

The school's single central record of employment checks meets statutory requirements. Practices to ensure that the school only employs people who are suitable to work with children are robust and thorough. You have arranged for the newly appointed business manager to attend safer recruitment training in January 2017. This is a sensible course of action aimed at further strengthening the robustness of the school's safer recruitment practice.

You have a good understanding of the 'Prevent' agenda and the school's responsibility to tackle radicalisation and extremism. You are committed to ensuring that pupils' horizons are broadened so that they are well equipped for life in modern British society.

Pupils feel very safe at school. They know what bullying is and is not and they say that it happens rarely at Steeple Morden. Pupils have been taught to tell if bullying occurs and they have confidence in staff to sort out problems when they arise. The school council's representatives have recently talked to pupils throughout the school in order to gather their thoughts about safety. Their ideas and suggestions for ways to make the school an even safer place have been shared with all pupils. This open approach is a key element of what makes this school safe.

Inspection findings

- The school's leaders and governors were shocked and disappointed by the Year 6 writing results in this year's national tests. Pupils' progress in writing was significantly below the national average in 2016. The proportion of pupils who reached the expected standard in writing was also well below the national average. This is at odds with the well above average proportion of pupils who made at least expected progress in writing in 2015.
- You have taken prompt action to address the relative weakness in writing. For example, staff have already received training on the teaching of grammar and are feeling more confident in this area as a result. Pupils' writing has been scrutinised more closely, by school staff and more widely, and this is helping to improve the accuracy of assessment in this area.
- In 2016 pupils made similar progress to other pupils nationally in the key stage 2 national tests in reading and mathematics. Pupils' attainment in reading was much higher than the national average.
- Pupils enjoy reading and show a great love of books. For example, in one class, pupils discussed the Harry Potter series of books with maturity, including the relative merits and weaknesses of the novels versus the films. In another example, a group of pupils were very keen to discuss the Roald Dahl book that they were reading and to describe and justify their favourite parts. Pupils were able to find sections of the text with ease. They read them aloud fluently and expressively.
- In 2015, the proportion of Year 1 pupils who reached the level of the phonics screening check was about half the national average. You and the school leaders took prompt and effective action in response to this very low result. The proportion of pupils who reached the expected level in 2016 was just below the national average.
- The improvements in the teaching of phonics and the improved outcomes for pupils are not fully reflected in pupils' writing. Too few pupils apply their phonics knowledge when spelling unfamiliar words.
- The work in pupils' exercise books shows that they are working at an appropriate level for their age. For example, in Year 3 the most able pupils write accurately in paragraphs with correct grammar and spelling. Pupils make good progress throughout the school.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school is very low. This means that assessment information for this group of pupils must be treated with caution. Inspection evidence shows clearly that disadvantaged pupils make the same good progress as their peers.
- Governors are a particular strength of the school. They play a key role in ensuring that the school remains good and that it continues to improve. They have a very clear vision and their expectations are high. Governors know the school very well and visit regularly. However, they understand that their role is a strategic one and they skilfully avoid interfering in operational matters. Governors have a very clear and accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. For example, they have an excellent working knowledge of the school's assessment information. This enables them to hold you and the school's other leaders to account very well.

- You monitor pupils' attendance closely and take appropriate action to address absence when necessary. In the past, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils has been notably low. This is no longer the case and no disadvantaged pupils had an overall attendance rate below 90% during the last academic year. So far this year, overall attendance is similar to the most recent national average.
- Although it is evident that, overall, pupils make good progress in writing, this is not as strong as it could be because they are not given sufficient opportunities to write freely and at length. Most pupils' books have a limited amount of writing in them. Teachers' expectations of how pupils should present their work and the care they should take are not the same throughout the school. In some classes pupils' books are scruffy and their handwriting is underdeveloped, limiting their ability to write efficiently in a neat, joined style. In others, work is neat, tidy and shows great care.
- The school's system for tracking the progress that pupils make is underdeveloped, particularly in writing. Pupils' attainment is assessed at regular intervals in reading, writing and mathematics but you and the school's other leaders do not focus sufficiently on the progress that pupils make between those assessment points. Leaders do not have a clear enough idea of what constitutes good progress over time. This means that leaders and governors are not able to check methodically whether all pupils and all groups of pupils are making good progress.
- The local authority provides good support to the school. The primary adviser knows the school well and has a good understanding of its strengths and its areas of relative weakness. You work closely with the primary adviser and take advice appropriately. The local authority's input in improving the quality of writing in the school has been prompt and appropriate and is already beginning to have an impact in improving outcomes in this area.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they take the following actions.

- Improve the teaching of writing so that more pupils make rapid progress by ensuring that:
 - assessment is robust and rigorous
 - pupils are provided with frequent opportunities to write freely and at length
 - recent improvements in the teaching of phonics are maintained and built on; and that pupils apply their new knowledge in their written work
 - all teachers have high expectations of pupils' handwriting and presentation.
- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - a tracking system is developed that allows leaders to check the progress pupils make as well as their attainment
 - leaders and teachers have a clear idea of what constitutes good progress within the school's chosen system
 - assessment links clearly with the demands of the current national curriculum, particularly in writing
 - governors are supplied with suitable information to allow them to check that pupils, and groups of pupils, throughout the school are making good progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Wendy Varney
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with you and the school's senior leaders, the chair and the vice-chair of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I met with the key stage 2 representatives of the school council. You took me on a tour of the school in action and I observed teaching and learning in three classes, two jointly with you. I looked at the work in pupils' exercise books and scrutinised a range of school documents, including the single central record of checks to ensure the suitability of staff to work with children.

The inspection explored the following key lines of enquiry:

- Why were writing results so much lower than results for other subjects in 2016? Do pupils make good progress in writing?
- What is the quality of phonics teaching like? Do pupils make good progress in phonics?
- Do disadvantaged pupils make good progress throughout the school and in a wide range of subjects?
- What are attendance rates like for disadvantaged pupils? What has the school done to address the previously high persistent absence of this group and is it working?
- Has the school's safeguarding policy been updated to reflect the changes to statutory guidance that came into effect in September 2016? Has the school kept up to date with changes to statutory guidance?