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Mrs Laura Weaver
Headteacher
Exford Church of England First School
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Dear Mrs Weaver

Short inspection of Exford Church of England First School

Following my visit to the school on 23 February 2017, 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, there has been a significant change to the leadership and management of the three-school federation of which the school is part. An interim executive governing board was imposed by the local authority, with the agreement of the local diocese, to secure stability and effective leadership within the school. Following your appointment as headteacher in April 2016, you earned the respect of your staff and new governing body. With their support you began to secure good teaching and learning provision within the school once more.

You have also established a good reputation among parents and the wider learning community. Parents who spoke with me confirmed that communication channels within the school are good. For example, parents appreciate being able to use social media to communicate with the school. New families are made very welcome and their children settle quickly to learning. Parents with younger children say that starting school has also been made much easier since the new pre-school opened. All agreed their children are happy, safe and making good progress in school. Furthermore, pupils who spoke with me said, 'We like our headteacher – she's amazing!' You have brought much needed stability and a fresh vision to the school and this is particularly appreciated by parents.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are safe in the school. A strong culture of safeguarding has been built around a secure knowledge of pupils' individual needs and any vulnerabilities they may demonstrate. Staff know the needs of pupils and their families well and are vigilant in spotting any evidence that a child may not be thriving. You and your staff have a very good knowledge of the pupils in your care whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable. Records show that the school is able to take appropriate action where necessary and works closely with external partners in order to help pupils to thrive as well as keep them safe.

You have put in place a rigorous system to monitor all pupils' attendance and effectively follow up on persistent absences. You are supporting pupils and their families to remove any barriers that may impede pupils' good attendance. Behaviour records confirm that the school works closely with these pupils and their families to help them thrive in school. The most recent published information indicates that overall absence this year is broadly in line with the national average. Parents who spoke with the inspector agreed they felt their children were safe and well cared for while at school. They were 'very happy' with the new headteacher and the stability in teaching provision which you have secured for their children.

Inspection findings

- One of my key lines of enquiry in helping me to decide whether the school remains good was to find out how well you have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection. Together, we found plenty of good-quality examples of evidence in pupils' books that show they have opportunities to write for a range of reasons and audiences. Thorough assessment arrangements are embedded within the school. Books show pupils' steady development in handwriting and presentation skills. We could clearly see in these books how the monitoring records for each pupil influence teachers' planning and activities provided for individual pupils. Furthermore, there is strong and consistent evidence in books that pupils are in the habit of using teachers' written feedback to improve their work further.
- Another line of enquiry considered how well your younger pupils learn to read. Reading outcomes for older pupils have remained a strength within the school. However, more recently, checks on younger pupils' phonic knowledge have shown a drop in standards. You have acted decisively to rectify this weakness. The youngest pupils now benefit from consistent, good-quality phonics teaching. Together, we visited the youngest pupils' class and saw children enthusiastically able to correctly identify words in a grid containing the letters 'air'. Later in the day, I heard a number of pupils read to me. Less confident readers used their phonics knowledge well in attempting to read unfamiliar words, while more confident readers read with fluency and obvious enjoyment. Throughout the school, pupils are making good progress in writing as they have opportunities to write for a range of audiences. With such small numbers in each cohort, you track the progress of disadvantaged pupils, those who

have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the most able as individuals. You have introduced regular times throughout the year to check on the progress of pupils in learning to read, spell and write. The most recent data you shared with me, on current pupils' progress in reading, indicates that most pupils are now making good progress towards achieving their end-of-year targets.

- A further line of enquiry looked at how well you are successfully demonstrating the capacity to bring about further improvements to the quality of teaching mathematics. The professional development of staff has been enhanced through the school's close collaboration with other schools in the federation and with other schools in the wider learning community. This is leading to an increase in teachers' confidence as they benefit from working alongside other professionals to develop their subject knowledge and skills. However, your checks on teachers' effectiveness, particularly in teaching mathematics in key stage 2, lack rigour. Where areas for improvement have been identified they are not followed through robustly. As a result, few pupils are currently working at the higher 'mastery' level in mathematics, whereas the youngest pupils who benefit from stable and consistently good teaching provision are making good progress in all areas of learning.
- My final line of enquiry looked at how well governors are provided with sufficient, accurate and evaluative information regarding the work of the school. You are benefiting from the mentoring and effective professional support of a local leader of education. This has helped to build your confidence as a new headteacher. Good communication channels are embedded within the school. The reformed governing body is well organised and demonstrating its strengthened capacity to drive improvement. This academic year, governors are following a monitoring programme to check first-hand on the work of the school. This is enabling them to gain an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. For example, governors have worked alongside you in observing mathematics lessons and the standard of work in pupils' books. Your written reports to governors are appropriately detailed. However, they lack a concise evaluation of the impact of school improvement initiatives.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- rigorous and decisive action is taken following the monitoring of teaching and learning so that pupils, particularly in key stage 2, are able to work and achieve at the higher levels in mathematics
- reports on the work of the school clearly evaluate the impact of any actions taken to secure improvements and are monitored robustly.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Bath and Wells, the regional schools commissioner

and the director of children's services for Somerset. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met regularly with you as part of a professional dialogue throughout the day. Together, we undertook observations of learning in lessons. I examined pupils' work, focusing on writing, mathematics and presentation. I also met with a representative from the governing body and spoke by telephone with the chair of the governing body. I talked with pupils and staff informally during the day. I also met with school councillors and a local leader of education who has been providing you with leadership support. Before the inspection, I examined a variety of documents including the school's website, published performance data and a summary of your school's self-evaluation document. I spoke with nine parents at the start of the day and also took into account the results of seven staff and eight pupil survey responses, as well as the online survey, Parent View.