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27 April 2017

Mrs Rizelle Crouch
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Crouch

Short inspection of St Nicholas CofE VA Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 1 March 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Since you became headteacher in January 2016, you have established a strong leadership team to tackle aspects of the school's work that need to improve and are driving the school forward effectively. You have a realistic view of the school through your thorough self-evaluation and are carefully using this to prioritise actions and resources. You have established teams of teachers who work well together to improve their teaching of literacy and mathematics. You have linked their performance targets to their areas of responsibility, which means that they understand what needs to improve and what their roles are in achieving this. Teachers value the opportunity to be involved in research projects through which they share expertise and best practice across their classes.

Leaders and governors work closely together to monitor how well the school is doing. Governors use their skills and expertise well to allocate responsibilities so that they knowledgeably hold leaders to account. The chair of governors acts as your 'critical friend' and governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths and of the areas of its work that still need to improve.

You, your leadership team and governing body ensure that St Nicholas CofE VA Primary School is at the heart of the local community. The school's Christian values and aims of 'Believing and Achieving' are promoted in all areas of teaching and

learning. This ethos creates a positive learning environment. Pupils care for and support each other, for example, with Year 6 pupils acting as buddies for younger children so that they can feel confident in their first year at school. One member of staff summed this up by describing the school as 'a nurturing, caring environment where children's development and learning experiences are our priority'.

A key priority for this year is to develop the teaching and learning of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Pupils in Years 5 and 6 confidently give examples of how they correct spellings independently using their growing understanding of spelling patterns and rules. These skills are less evident in other year groups and, in some classes, pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to edit and improve their own writing.

It is evident that pupils complete age-appropriate work in a range of subjects and that they use their literacy skills well in Years 5 and 6 to research their work. Their work is also neatly presented. You have recently introduced reading challenges which encourage pupils to expand their vocabulary and read for enjoyment across a wide range of texts. These are often linked to the lessons and topics that pupils are studying. There are, however, too few opportunities for pupils to write at length exploring their ideas and using their developing writing skills sufficiently well across a wide range of subject areas.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school has a culture where all staff and governors are committed to safeguarding pupils and recognise their responsibility in ensuring that pupils are safe and secure in school. Safeguarding has a high priority and is a regular agenda item at staff and governing body meetings. Leaders ensure that staff are kept up to date with all the required training, including the 'Prevent' duty. Information on safeguarding, prominently displayed in the staff room, includes policies and procedures for reporting any concerns so that staff are kept up to date and know how to respond if there are health or well-being concerns about a pupil. Staff know the pupils well and are therefore quick to identify any concerns. These are swiftly investigated and specialist agencies are involved when required.

Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You ensure that the necessary checks are made on all staff prior to their taking up their appointments. Minor errors in how information is recorded were put right during the inspection.

Pupils say that they feel safe because 'there's always someone you can trust'. They have a good understanding of bullying and say that, although it rarely happens, they feel confident about talking to an adult who will sort it out. They value their 'peer mediators' who step in to help with any friendship problems they may have. Pupils describe how the school helps them to understand how to be safe when using the internet. Almost all parents who responded to the online inspection questionnaire reported that their children felt safe at school and were well looked

after and nurtured. The school website provides helpful advice for parents on internet safety.

Inspection findings

- My first key line of enquiry for the inspection was how well provision in the early years promotes the development of basic skills, particularly in writing, so that children make good progress from their starting points and are well prepared for Year 1. This was because most children make good progress in key aspects of their development, for example in personal, social, emotional and communication skills, but some children make less progress in developing their writing skills.
- Children start in the early years with skills and abilities that are in line with or above those that are typical for their age. You had already put an action plan in place to promote the development of basic skills. The local authority has provided support which has had a positive impact in creating a balance between work that is led by the teachers and opportunities for children to explore ideas for themselves. This is supporting the development of their writing skills well. Children are supported by adults asking questions to make them think about their learning and encourage them to take part in writing activities, for example in creating a shopping list in the role-play area or writing about a model they have made.
- Adults in the early years keep records of what children can do through their 'learning journeys'. My analysis showed that, although these contain relevant detail, they are not used well enough to show where children are in their progress or to plan activities that challenge children to make all the progress they can.
- My second key line of enquiry arose from my analysis of the school's assessment information. It is related to assessment and, in particular, how teachers use assessment information within and between lessons to plan challenging work, both for the most able pupils, and to make sure that boys make as much progress as girls. To address this, you, together with members of the leadership team, have established effective tracking systems to monitor the progress of all groups of pupils, including the most able.
- Leaders quickly identify pupils who are falling behind. As a result, interventions and teaching strategies are adapted to meet pupils' needs and their progress is improving.
- You are challenging teachers to take rapid action to support pupils who are not making as much progress as they could. This approach is in its early stages; however, pupils' work shows that they are challenged at an appropriate level, particularly in Years 5 and 6.
- You are also encouraging pupils to be involved in assessing their own learning. Targets for writing identify criteria for pupils who are working at age-related expectations but also provide increased challenge for the most able pupils who are working at greater depth. Some pupils said that they are not always challenged in lessons and you acknowledge that, in some instances, teachers are

still not using assessment well enough to increase challenge and pitch work at the highest levels of pupils' capabilities.

- My third key line of enquiry related to how well leaders have addressed the priorities from the previous inspection. These included making the school development plan a more useful tool for school improvement. You have sharpened the quality of evaluation and made sure that improvement planning focuses tightly on the key priorities that will make the most difference.
- Planning allows new initiatives to be put in place and ensures an adequate period of development and review, during which the changes you make become embedded across the school. Working closely with governors, you monitor improvement regularly. As a result, the school is improving and staff say that they have a better understanding of what is expected of them.
- A review of the school's curriculum and how pupils use and develop their basic skills across a range of subjects was the focus for my last line of enquiry. This was chosen because there is limited information about the curriculum on the school's website and I wanted to explore this further. The curriculum is broad, balanced and relevant to the needs of all pupils.
- Pupils say that they enjoy learning, especially when they see the links between subjects, which are made clear through teachers' careful planning. Pupils talk with enthusiasm about visits to museums such as the William Morris Gallery when studying art and the Museum of London to explore life in Victorian times. They also enjoy experiences in school, such as when their classroom became a French café as part of a 'World Kitchen' topic.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- assessment is used effectively in the early years to plan sufficiently challenging experiences to make sure that children are doing as well as they can
- teachers use assessment within lessons to increase challenge and pitch work at the highest levels of pupils' capabilities
- improved opportunities are provided for pupils to engage in extended writing across curriculum areas to develop their higher writing skills.

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

Yours sincerely

Pauline Macmillan
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the assistant headteacher and the chair of governors to discuss progress since the previous inspection and the school's self-evaluation. The inspection meetings also included discussions with the inclusion coordinator, the early years leader and six governors. I had a telephone conversation with a representative of Hertfordshire local authority. I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including your self-evaluation, the school development plan, policies, information relating to the curriculum and assessment information for current pupils. I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures and the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children. Together, we undertook joint observations of learning across the school, including the early years provision, looked at work in pupils' books across a range of subjects and spoke with pupils about their learning. I met with a group of pupils to discuss their learning across the curriculum and to gather their views about the school, behaviour and safety. I looked at the 79 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and other communications received from parents during the inspection. The views of 16 members of staff shared through Ofsted's online questionnaire were taken into account.