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17 May 2017

Mrs Christine Maxwell
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Maxwell

Short inspection of Combe St Nicholas Church of England VA Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 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 September 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 have provided stable leadership since taking up your post in September 2015. You have retained the character of this small school while continually seeking innovations to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Pupil numbers are growing. This reflects the confidence the local community has in the school. The school is in a strong position for the future. Your passionate commitment to pupils' creative and artistic activities demonstrates your ambition to develop their all-round abilities at the same time as raising their academic achievement.

Pupils are proud of their teachers and their school. Many pupils told me that care, courtesy and consideration are typical features of their relationships with each other. I agree. You have successfully developed pupils' commitment to their learning through rewards, for example the Purdon Cup, awarded each term for effort. As a consequence of their diligence, pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics is at least in line with the national average and in many cases above it. Pupils have many opportunities to apply their skills in different contexts. For example, pupils enhanced their literacy skills through their involvement in a production of 'The Tempest' with other schools.

At the time of the previous inspection, mathematics was highlighted as an area the

school needed to improve. Since that time, the school has successfully introduced the new mathematics curriculum. Teaching develops pupils' problem-solving and reasoning skills effectively. Pupils enjoy opportunities to extend their skills. For example, they performed well in a recent maths challenge competition for schools in the local area. In 2016, a greater proportion of pupils attained at a high standard in key stage 2 mathematics than found nationally.

Pupils' attainment in the phonics screening test last year was lower than in previous years. You have taken effective action to improve the teaching of phonics. Professional development activities to enhance teachers' skills in this area are now hitting home. Consequently, a greater proportion of Year 1 pupils are now on track to reach the standard required. However, you accept that the quality of phonics teaching is not yet consistent enough.

Children in the Reception Year consistently reach the early learning goals in writing. The majority of pupils go on to attain the expected standard in writing by the end of key stage 1, but last year pupils did not achieve at a greater depth. You are ambitious for all pupils to excel. Therefore, you have introduced higher expectations of teachers' planning for writing. Current pupils' confidence and ability in writing have improved because of these raised expectations.

Pupils' progress in reading in key stage 2 was around the national average in 2016. You have identified this as an area of focus for improvement. You have recently revised the teaching of reading. Reluctant readers receive good support to improve their skills as a result of the introduction of initiatives to promote reading. Many pupils are already keen readers, but their choice of book is often limited to a narrow range. This constrains the development of their vocabulary.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have ensured that secure safeguarding arrangements are in place and records are detailed and of a suitable quality. All staff are vetted to make sure they are suitable to work with children. You have ensured that policies and practice meet the latest statutory requirements. Suitable risk assessments have been carried out for pupils' activities; for example, taking pupils to access the playing fields which are off the main school site. Where it has been necessary to work with external agencies you have acted swiftly and appropriately.

Pupils receive and understand guidance on potential risks and how to keep themselves safe in a range of situations. For example, pupils from Years 3 and 4 recently demonstrated their good understanding of online risks by creating short videos to teach other pupils about internet safety. Pupils say that they feel safe at school and that any form of bullying is very rare. The vast majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, believe that their child is happy at school and well looked after.

You have made certain that all staff are suitably trained and, therefore, they know how to respond to concerns about a child's welfare. School records show that any

concerns are logged promptly and acted on. A culture of vigilance exists throughout the school because you have ensured that safeguarding is seen as a high priority by all staff.

Inspection findings

- The chair of governors was appointed in September 2016. He has approached the role with vigour, improving the organisation of governance, recruiting new governors and fund-raising successfully. Governors work closely with the school and so they know its strengths and weaknesses well. As a result, the governing body offers suitable challenge to senior leaders.
- One of the key lines of enquiry to decide if the school remained good focused on the quality of phonics teaching. In both 2014 and 2015 the proportion of pupils attaining the expected standard in phonics was above the national average. In 2016 the proportion fell significantly and was well below average. In response to this dip, leaders changed the organisation of phonics teaching in the school day. This allows greater flexibility for teaching pupils in mixed-age groups. Hence, teaching is now more appropriate to pupils' level of skill. Key stage 1 pupils' confidence in recognising letters and sounds has improved, the vast majority are attaining at the expected standard. Teachers' expectations of children's early reading development in the Reception Year have been raised. Consequently, children secure basic skills earlier and encouragement received from numerous volunteer helpers further supports their progress. While there have been improvements, there is still too much variation in the effectiveness of phonics teaching in the classroom and through extra support. Some volunteers are not au fait with the approaches to early reading skills teachers use. Therefore, on occasions, volunteers do not reinforce these classroom approaches and so pupils' skills do not advance as quickly as they could.
- Another key line of enquiry evaluated pupils' progress in writing in key stage 1. In each of the previous three years, a high proportion of children in the early years achieved the expected standard in writing by the end of the Reception Year. In 2016, while an above-average proportion of pupils attained the expected standard by the end of Year 2, pupils did not go on to attain at a greater depth. Leaders have taken steps to sharpen teachers' planning. For example, at the start of each topic pupils are given specific information about the type of writing involved and the target audience. Teachers' assessments, particularly in Year 1, show that a higher proportion of pupils are now on track to attain at a greater depth in writing this year. Leaders have also set out to improve pupils' handwriting. Pupils' work shows that the quality of their letter formation and confidence in using cursive style have improved steadily over time.
- A third key line of enquiry looked at leaders' effectiveness in promoting good progress in reading in key stage 2. Although an above-average proportion of Year 6 pupils attained the expected standard in reading in 2016, leaders' aspirations for pupils go beyond this. Revised approaches to reading have placed greater emphasis on comprehension and pupils' ability to skim read and to make inferences from the text. An online reading scheme and a recently introduced reading challenge programme are increasing pupils' motivation and raising their

achievement. Pupils are confident, enthusiastic readers. However, their choice of text is often limited to particular genres.

- Pupils support each other well. For example, a group of Year 4 girls, having received expert cricket coaching, were eager to pass on their skills by teaching their peers. Pupils' willingness to accept each other contributes to a palpable sense of togetherness at the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- further opportunities are provided for staff to share the best practice that exists in the school in phonics teaching
- volunteers who support the school are given training in how to help pupils develop their early reading skills
- teachers extend the range of texts pupils read so that pupils' vocabulary is developed.

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

Paul Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held formal meetings with you and with the chair of the governing body. I spoke with many pupils informally at playtime and I held a meeting with pupils from the school council. I looked at examples of pupils' work, made observations of learning across the school, and spoke with pupils during lessons. I scrutinised a variety of documents including the school's own evaluation of its performance, assessment information, records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and other information relating to safeguarding. I took account of 32 responses to Parent View and one letter from a parent.