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6 December 2017

Miss Jo Hudson
Headteacher
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Dear Miss Hudson

Short inspection of St James' Church of England First School, Alderholt

Following my visit to the school on 22 November 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 became an academy in December 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. However, there have been challenges along the way. Difficulties in recruiting a headteacher and an unsettled time at the school meant that outcomes for pupils fell in recent years. When the school joined the Heath Academy Trust, trustees were quick to see that improvements to aspects of the school's work needed to happen. Following an external review that made several recommendations, they worked with impressive urgency. There have been significant improvements to governance arrangements. Using expertise from within the Trust, a new headteacher took up her post in April this year.

The Trust provides targeted professional development for staff, high-quality support for the headteacher and a renewed sense of excitement about learning for pupils. Leaders at all levels have a clear vision to ensure that this small, caring school provides the highest quality education for pupils. Parents have noticed this upturn in the school. Many expressed their views, saying how delighted they are about the improvements made.

You, as headteacher, are ambitious for pupils at the school and you have quickly gained the trust and respect of the school community. You have a clear plan for improvement that focuses on ensuring that pupils, including the most able pupils, make excellent progress from their starting points. There was a marked improvement in pupils' outcomes seen at the end of the last school year compared

to those of the previous year, although you agree that there is more to do, as the most able pupils still do not achieve higher standards.

Following a recommendation in the previous inspection to improve mathematics, you have led the transformation of the teaching and learning in this area. New, consistent teaching strategies and mathematical resources help pupils at every stage of mathematical development. Pupils' books show the positive difference that this is making to their understanding of how to apply their mathematics skills to solve complex mathematical problems.

While securing significant improvements, you are careful to hold onto successful areas of the school curriculum that support pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. The strong sense of values such as tolerance and respect permeates school life. Pupils' personal and physical development is well thought out. Pupils enjoy exploring and learning in the forest area and taking part in the wealth of physical activities that staff provide throughout the day.

Safeguarding is effective.

On starting your role as headteacher, you wisely reviewed the school's safeguarding procedures and policies. There are thorough and well-understood systems in place for staff to report concerns. The designated lead for safeguarding reports concerns promptly and liaises with a wide range of agencies appropriately. Staff have a good understanding of the latest safeguarding guidance including issues surrounding child exploitation.

There is a culture of care and vigilance. For example, there is a daily risk assessment walk of the school playground to ensure that it is safe and ready for pupils. Staff briefings include time to discuss safeguarding issues. Staff also receive information about any learning points from serious incidents that take place across the country.

Inspection findings

- You create a real sense of optimism and high expectations. You insist on high standards and you provide clear guidance and challenge to staff. In response, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is making great strides forward.
- We agreed to focus on particular areas to explore further. Our first line of enquiry focused on how well the school is working to improve the progress of the most able pupils. Your work to improve the teaching, learning and assessment in mathematics includes ensuring that pupils, particularly the most able pupils, have the challenge they need during lessons so that they extend their skills.
- Staff have received development and support in raising expectations during mathematics lessons. New daily 'maths missions' sessions ensure that the most able pupils are extended through problem-solving activities. Pupils' books show that pupils are responding well to the additional challenges and many, including the most able, are making better progress.

- We looked at the progress that the small number of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities make. An individual plan for each pupil identifies the extra teaching and targeted support needed. Pupils' books show that this approach is helping them to make solid progress and to catch up with their peers.
- You have started work to improve the quality of writing across the school. The teaching of phonics is well organised and of high quality. There are new approaches to handwriting. Pupils are taking greater care with the presentation of their work.
- Your focus is now on ensuring that pupils write longer pieces of writing so that they are able to bring their ideas as well as their writing skills together. In the observations of the teaching of writing across the school, we agreed that teachers could do more to show pupils high-quality examples so that pupils have good models of writing from which to work.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers and teaching assistants develop the skills and confidence needed so that they are able to provide high-quality examples for pupils, particularly in writing
- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment continues to improve so that the most able pupils achieve higher standards in a range of subjects.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the diocese of Salisbury, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Dorset. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tonwen Empson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Learning across the school was observed by the inspector alongside the headteacher. Meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior staff. A range of pupils' books and a number of documents relating to safeguarding and pupils' progress were scrutinised. The inspector talked with pupils throughout the day. Meetings took place with the chair of the governing body, the chief education officer and chair of the board of the Heath Academy Trust. The inspector talked to a number of parents at the start of the day and took account of the 29 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.