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Mr Rob Halls
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Dear Mr Halls

Short inspection of The Thomas Coram Church of England School

Following my visit to the school on 7 February 2018, 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

The school has expanded significantly in the four years since its last inspection, with around 70 more pupils currently on roll. In the summer term 2017, the governing body entered into a formal collaboration agreement with one of your two partner schools, Victoria Church of England Infant and Nursery School. You took up your role as executive headteacher, with a separate head of school in this junior school and in the infant school.

Thomas Coram is a lovely school with excellent facilities for learning. It is a school that achieves high standards, and where pupils can excel. One common theme conveyed consistently by staff, parents and pupils, and clearly evident on the inspection, is the friendly, supportive and welcoming character of the school community. Pupils are carefully nurtured from the moment they start, but they are also encouraged to take on responsibilities and to be independent and, at all times, considerate of others. Parents of pupils who have only recently joined the school, including at times other than the start of Year 3, are full of praise for the way that their children have been welcomed and integrated. Parents spoken to during the inspection, and those who responded to Ofsted's parent survey, were overwhelmingly positive about their school, with remarkable unanimity across all questions. The 'free-text' comments included a few negative points, including concerns about communication or dissatisfaction with the way that incidents have

been handled, but any criticisms were far outweighed by positive examples on these very issues.

Staff set high standards for pupils, both in terms of their conduct, and in their academic work. Pupils respond by behaving very well and working hard; by the age of 11 they are well prepared for secondary school. By the end of Year 6, pupils' attainment in reading and in mathematics is well above national figures. Results in writing are also above average, but in recent years key stage 2 results have not shown that pupils made good progress from their already high starting points.

Leaders, including governors, have established a strong culture of continuous improvement. They recognise what the school does well and have pinpointed aspects of provision that are inconsistent and/or need development. The school's self-evaluation is accurate and thorough, and its improvement plan is well implemented. Under your strong leadership, Thomas Coram has flourished. Senior and middle leaders, including subject leaders, share the same high ambition, but staff recognise that you and your governors are mindful of workload pressures, and that you prioritise improvement sensibly and realistically. Governance too is a notable strength of the school. Governors use their good range of knowledge and skills to effectively support and challenge school leaders.

Pupils talk enthusiastically about their learning. They develop a love of reading and an enjoyment of the different subjects they study, particularly when the curriculum is brought to life with the 'wow' days. Pupils are offered a remarkable range of extra-curricular clubs and enrichment activities, including many different sports and competitions. Music is a particular strength, and all year groups have their own production. Team work is at the heart of the school, whether it is sport, drama or breaking the world record (with your partner infant schools) for people hopping on one leg!

Safeguarding is effective.

The school meets all statutory requirements and responsibilities with regard to safeguarding. Leaders are meticulous in checking that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, and governors maintain an excellent oversight of all issues connected to pupil safety and welfare. There are thorough systems in place to ensure that all the necessary checks are carried out before new staff take up their posts. Staff are suitably trained in safeguarding, and understand the possible risks and vulnerabilities of individual pupils. Procedures for referring concerns are carefully documented and appropriately involve external agencies.

The pupils say that they feel safe, and speak confidently about how they might raise any concerns with an adult, including if they have worries about bullying. Almost every parent agreed that children are safe and happy at school; very few made any mention of bullying at all. The school gives e-safety a suitably high priority, as part of developing pupils' independence and resilience. Specific lessons on the dangers of social media and the safe use of the internet give pupils the knowledge and confidence to talk openly about these issues.

Inspection findings

- This inspection focused on the priorities identified at the previous inspection and in the school's plan, primarily: to evaluate whether pupils are stretched in their learning, and to check the school's work to support pupils who are susceptible to underachievement because of higher levels of absence and lack of engagement.
- Although standards are above national figures, pupils' results at the end of key stage 2 in writing have lagged behind the impressive outcomes in reading and in mathematics. Most pupils, when they start in Year 3, are at or above age-related expectations in their writing and already have a wide vocabulary. However, they do not excel in the same way they do in reading.
- Leaders have got to grips with strengthening pupils' writing, and have successfully introduced a range of strategies to make Thomas Coram a 'writing school' as well as a 'reading school'. Teachers have raised their expectations of what pupils can achieve, for example by placing greater emphasis on modelling the technical aspects of complex syntax and grammar. Evidence from lesson observations and talking to pupils about their work shows that progress in writing has accelerated since September. Pupils clearly rise to the challenge of producing high-quality writing; they particularly enjoyed entering the BBC 500 Words writing competition. Teaching includes more regular spelling work, but strategies are not embedded for older pupils to develop good habits in checking spelling.
- Assessment of writing is a strength in English lessons, but is less well developed across the curriculum. Teachers focus sharply on getting pupils to draft, edit and improve their writing, and encourage them to 'magpie' ideas from working walls and the exemplary ideas and work of others.
- In subjects other than English, pupils' attainment is sometimes capped by the level of difficulty of work presented. In geography and history, for example, teachers' expectations of pupils' writing are not as high because assignments do not consolidate the skills established in English lessons, and learning, generally, is less demanding. In mathematics, pupils who are 'middle ability' at Thomas Coram could sometimes tackle more challenging problems.
- Disadvantaged pupils achieve well at Thomas Coram, notably in reading, where they make exceptional progress. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is lower than that of other pupils at the school, and their achievement in writing is weak. Leaders are alert to the individual barriers to pupils' achievement, and have effectively targeted support for pupils who need it most, including those who are disadvantaged and have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Carefully focused work this year has significantly reduced incidence of persistent absence.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers expect the highest standards of pupils' work by:

- promoting more sophisticated written work across the curriculum
- embedding strategies to develop accurate spelling
- having high ambitions for what all pupils might achieve
- they are forensic in identifying barriers that might inhibit pupils' full participation, engagement and high achievement, so that every pupil is able to excel and take full advantage of the opportunities that the school provides.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I spoke with you and the head of school, and held a series of formal meetings with senior leaders, subject leaders, new teachers and staff with specific responsibility for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities; I also interviewed a group of pupils and six governors.

I spoke informally to parents in the playground and evaluated the 91 parental responses to Parent View, including 51 free-text comments. I took note of the 36 staff survey responses and 48 pupil survey returns. I talked to staff and pupils during the day and observed teaching and learning in almost all classes, alongside the head of school. I looked at pupils' work and reviewed a wide range of information provided, including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans and external reviews of progress. I scrutinised the school's safeguarding documentation, including the single central record and procedures for staff recruitment and child protection.