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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Mrs Jacqi Stephens
Head of Academy
Ilsham Church of England Academy
Ilsham Road
Torquay
Devon
TQ1 2JQ

Dear Mrs Stephens

Short inspection of Ilsham Church of England Academy

Following my visit to the school on 18 April 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 June 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You lead your dedicated staff team with great enthusiasm and a determination to make sure that all pupils are valued and cared for. The school's distinctive Christian character is reflected in the school's core values of friendship, humility, responsibility and respect. Pupils and staff demonstrate these values in all that they do.

All of the staff members who responded to the staff questionnaire say that they are proud to work at the school. They feel respected and value the many opportunities provided for them to develop professionally. A group of senior leaders told me how the multi-academy trust encourages staff to use findings from academic research to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Leaders work closely together to support improvements in all aspects of school life. One leader commented, 'We are a tight team. We look after each other.'

Trustees provide the right balance of support and challenge. They make sure that they receive the information necessary to understand fully the performance of different groups of pupils. For example, trustees have a deep and accurate understanding of the progress being made by pupils that receive additional funding. They check the effectiveness of school initiatives by utilising advice from external consultants to check that their judgements are accurate. The chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust explained that the school does not have a specific person to champion pupils who receive additional funding because everyone is expected to be responsible for this aspect. Leaders have identified that while these pupils are making good overall progress and achieving expected

levels in line with other pupils, few reach the higher levels over time by the end of key stage 2. School leaders closely check that the use of additional funding is leading to all disadvantaged pupils reaching the levels that they are capable of. Current assessments show that teachers across the school are providing appropriately challenging provision that is raising standards.

You and other school leaders value the school's partnership with parents and deal effectively with any concerns. Parents who spoke with me during the inspection, and those who responded online, were all impressed with the care and the high quality of education provided. One parent stated, 'I can't speak highly enough about this school. The support that I have received to help my child is phenomenal.' Parents told me that they were particularly impressed by the care taken to provide bespoke support to meet the needs of their children. One commented, 'Every teacher we have encountered has gone above and beyond to provide the best education possible.'

At the previous inspection, school leaders were asked to ensure that teachers effectively check pupils' understanding during lessons and react swiftly so that pupils make better progress across the school. The report also referred to increasing the level of challenge for all pupils and ensuring that pupils fully concentrated in lessons in order to do their best. You have provided high-quality training for teachers and support staff to make sure that ongoing assessment of pupils' progress is accurate and used by staff to move pupils forward in their learning.

This has led to significant improvements in pupils' outcomes in mathematics. In 2017, key stage 2 progress in mathematics was in the top 20% for schools nationally, with 96% of pupils achieving the expected level in Year 6 and 40% reaching the higher level. You have identified that the progress made by key stage 2 pupils in reading and writing was close to the national averages in 2016 and 2017 and below the progress seen in mathematics. As a result, you are determined to increase rates of progress in reading and writing across the school.

On a visit to the early years classroom, you showed me how effective use was made of the indoor and outdoor learning spaces to provide challenging reading and writing experiences for the children. The early years staff make sure that each activity gives children the opportunity to develop their reading and writing skills. For example, children read about ingredients that they will need to make particular meals. They write their own shopping lists and visit the nearby stores to buy the food. They then follow their instructions to make or bake whatever they have planned. All of the children in the Reception Year have their writing progress displayed on a special writing wall and there is clear evidence of strong progress being made by all of the children from their varied starting points.

Writing displays in all classrooms demonstrate rising standards during the current academic year. Scrutiny of pupils' literacy workbooks in all classes supports the current school assessments that show improving rates of progress in reading and writing in each year group. Pupils are able to articulate their improvements in writing. One pupil told me, 'I know I'm getting better because I am using different sentence types and I now use semi-colons to link my sentences together.'

In all classes visited, we witnessed full, active engagement by pupils who were clearly enjoying their studies. High-quality presentation in workbooks also displayed the care and pride taken by pupils over time. Pupils are taught to use critique as a tool to assess the quality of their work and to make improvements. There is clear evidence to show that this is proving to be a highly effective approach with examples of impact, following pupils' suggestions, evident in workbooks. One pupil explained, 'When I am critiquing, I read a paragraph carefully then ask my partner to check it. It is useful to have another pair of eyes!'

Safeguarding is effective.

You ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Training is up to date, records are well maintained and appropriate checks are made of staff before they start employment. Trustees ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school and you receive excellent support and monitoring from experienced multi-academy trust officers. You work effectively with external agencies to make sure that pupils receive the support that they need.

Pupils are taught how to stay safe in school, in the community and when online. They told me that they always feel safe at school and know where to seek help if anything is concerning them. Pupils told me that bullying was extremely rare and the parents who responded to the online questionnaire or spoke with me during the inspection echoed this view.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, we agreed the particular aspects of the school's work on which the inspection would focus.
- The first line of enquiry considered how well school leaders were ensuring that pupils' progress is assessed effectively across the curriculum. This aspect was identified as a priority, following a review in 2017.
- Leaders' assessments of pupils' progress across the curriculum are accurate and based on teachers' good subject knowledge. A system for assessing ongoing progress by pupils is used to identify any pupils who are failing to meet the identified age-related expectations. During our visits to classrooms, in both key stages, we looked at the progress being made over time in a range of subjects. We found clear evidence to show that pupils are making good overall progress and addressing the suggestions from their teachers and fellow pupils.
- The next line of enquiry focused on what leaders have done to ensure that teachers use assessment information to set tasks that challenge pupils to make good progress in reading and writing. In 2017, key stage 2 progress in reading and writing was similar to the national averages but not as strong as the progress seen in mathematics. School leaders have identified this as a priority and are carefully tracking the progress being made by current pupils in all classes.
- You described a number of strategies that have been strengthened to boost progress in reading and writing. Current school information suggests that these initiatives are accelerating progress. Teachers and experienced teaching assistants give children in the

Reception Year and key stage 1 carefully tailored reading and writing provision each day. This is in the form of active, exciting lessons that motivate the children and encourage them to learn increasingly difficult words and use these in their writing. You are convinced that this provides a firm foundation for pupils' development in literacy and was a key factor in enabling all Year 1 pupils to achieve the expected standard in the 2017 phonics screening check.

- Another successful initiative has involved encouraging teachers to use questioning and verbal feedback more effectively to encourage pupils to think more deeply about their learning. We saw an excellent example of this during a Year 4 writing activity where pupils were improving their descriptions of story settings. The high quality of the teacher's questioning enabled all of the pupils to closely examine their texts and make improvements. For example, the teacher asked a pupil to be more specific about why he had identified another pupil's description of 'an arching tree' as a good example of personification. The pupil replied, 'The tree has human qualities!'
- The improving quality of writing in pupils' workbooks and writing displays in all classrooms supports the school's findings that rates of progress are increasing across the school in reading and writing.
- The third line of enquiry assessed how well leaders are checking that additional funding is being used effectively to improve outcomes for the most able disadvantaged pupils in key stage 2 in reading and writing. Over time, outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 have been good compared with national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. However, few disadvantaged pupils have reached the higher levels in reading and writing.
- Leaders and trustees have identified the need to improve outcomes for the most able disadvantaged pupils as a major priority for the school. They have identified barriers to pupils' learning and have introduced individualised support for pupils. In each class, we looked at the progress being made by the most able disadvantaged pupils in reading and writing. We also talked with a number of pupils about the progress they were making. Scrutiny of workbooks and evidence from discussions with pupils support the school's assessment that a higher proportion of this group are working at higher levels. Leaders anticipate that this will be reflected in the 2018 Year 6 outcomes.
- The final line of enquiry investigated what actions leaders had taken to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. Overall rates of absence at the school have been lower than the national average over time. However, in 2017 the rate of persistent absence for pupils eligible for free school meals rose significantly. Leaders quickly identified this and assessed the wide range of strategies used to improve attendance. The school has been effectively supported by the family support team that works across the trust to support families where attendance is an issue. There has also been a strong stance on families taking holidays in term time. Consequently, the rate of attendance has improved for this group in the current year and is now in line with the national average for all pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- rates of progress in reading and writing at key stage 2 improve to match the progress currently seen in mathematics
- current effective initiatives enable a higher proportion of the most able disadvantaged pupils to achieve the higher levels in reading and writing in national assessments at key stage 2.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Exeter, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Torbay. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Hodson
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the executive headteacher, the chief executive officer, two members of the local committee, the human resources manager, the trust safeguarding leader and a group of senior and middle leaders. We visited the Reception Year and classrooms in both key stages to assess the progress being made by pupils. I looked at pupils' workbooks and talked with pupils in classes and at a separate meeting. We considered the school's information on the progress being made by current pupils.

We looked at a range of documentary evidence. This included the school's evaluation of its own performance and plans for improvement. I looked at various documents related to safeguarding, including the central record and examples of recent referrals made to external agencies. We also assessed current rates of attendance for groups of pupils and specifically for pupils eligible for free school meals.

I gathered views from parents and took account of 34 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. I received several free-text responses from parents and results of the staff and pupil questionnaires.