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Mrs Cathy Penfold
Headteacher
Sissinghurst Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School
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Dear Mrs Penfold

Short inspection of Sissinghurst Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 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 June 2013.

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 the school with passion and a determination that pupils will enjoy their learning in a safe, nurturing environment. You have built a cohesive staff team which shares your vision for excellence. Your deputy headteacher also provides strong leadership and is an excellent role model for staff. Her classroom practice and use of coaching skills to support colleagues are key in driving school improvement.

Relationships between pupils and staff are very constructive. As a result, pupils are happy, work hard and are reflective learners. Pupils' enjoyment of school was evident right from the start of the inspection, as they ran through the school's gates, keen to get to their classrooms to start their learning. They enthusiastically join in extra-curricular clubs and regularly achieve well in local sporting events. Music is a strength of the school, with flourishing recorder groups and a choir. The choir were very proud to sing at the O2 Arena on the day of the inspection. There are many examples of rich, vibrant and exciting learning experiences enjoyed by pupils, such as the forest school and residential visits.

Staff, parents and carers, the local authority and governors are all highly appreciative of your astute leadership and understanding of how pupils learn. You

have a sharp eye for identifying effective teaching and learning, with a clear sense of how well tasks have been matched to pupils' abilities. Most lessons observed and books seen indicate that pupils are challenged appropriately in their learning. However, you agree that this is not consistent across the school and have rightly made this a priority for improvement.

Parents were keen to tell me of the strong community spirit which you have established in the school. This is evident through parents' involvement in reading initiatives, such as being 'mystery readers' in the early years and fundraising to commission a reading tree in the school's entrance hall.

Since the previous inspection, senior and middle leaders have become more effective in their roles. For example, their thorough analysis of pupils' assessment information showed that pupils needed to improve their calculation skills in mathematics and deepen their understanding of what they were reading. As a result of strategies introduced in these subjects, many pupils now achieve standards above those expected for their age, and disadvantaged pupils' attainment has risen considerably.

Teachers who are responsible for the standards of achievement in subjects other than English and mathematics benefit from the strong and effective support provided by your senior team. You are aware, however, that pupils' progress in these subjects is not yet secure and that the rigour of subject leadership for all subjects needs to be developed further.

After the previous inspection, the governing body was asked to develop its monitoring role in order to have a greater impact on school improvement. Since then, it has worked tirelessly to play an effective role in monitoring the school's performance closely. Governors gather first-hand information to inform their discussions and decisions. Their visits are more focused and so governors know the school well. They are beginning to monitor the wider curriculum to ensure strong progress across a range of subjects besides English and mathematics.

Teamwork is a strength of the school. As a result, everyone is clear about how the school can improve further. Leaders are taking the right actions to achieve these improvements.

Safeguarding is effective.

All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and regularly updated in line with current statutory guidance. Suitability checks on staff, volunteers and all who regularly visit the school are recorded in an exemplary manner. Entry to the site is rigorously controlled. The emotional and physical well-being of the pupils defines the culture of the school and is of paramount importance to all staff.

Pupils feel safe and happy in school. They trust their teachers to help with any worries they may have. The very few incidents of poor behaviour are quickly and effectively dealt with.

The school works closely with outside agencies when pupils are thought to be at risk. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe from harm when on the internet and are proud to be e-safety ambassadors. You also provide parents with useful information, for example through assemblies, to help them to keep their children safe on the internet.

Inspection findings

- Leadership is effective. Historically, standards have been above the national average and leaders were quick to tackle the dip in the proportion of pupils exceeding national standards for reading in 2017. Initiatives to improve pupils' progress in reading include reading 'buddies' from Years 5 and 6 working with Reception children. Additional adults provide good support for underachieving pupils. The profile of reading has been raised across the school, with attractive reading displays in classrooms and in the general circulation areas. As a result, current pupils are making good progress in reading.
- The effectiveness of teaching in mathematics has improved as more emphasis has been placed on developing pupils' reasoning skills in every class. This has led to more pupils working at greater depth in mathematics and suitable challenge for the most able pupils. Work in books shows that most-able pupils are routinely challenged in many lessons but this is not consistent across the school.
- Help for small groups and individual support in mathematics are leading to pupils' greater fluency and expertise when calculating. Pupils are increasingly able to explain their mathematical reasoning and to not give up when work is difficult. For instance, a Year 1 group of pupils, after much discussion and a few false starts, were successful in solving an addition problem independently.
- Governors monitor how well leaders use additional funding for disadvantaged pupils. Well-thought-through support and leaders' high aspirations for this group of pupils ensure that the majority make consistently good progress from their starting points.
- Your inclusion leader has been highly effective in building good relationships with vulnerable families and getting support for them from relevant outside agencies. Assessment information, as well as work scrutiny, shows the very positive impact of extra help for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Their emotional needs are met particularly well by the school's support team, for example through counselling, play therapy and additional personalised learning support.
- Strategies to improve writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar and to broaden pupils' vocabulary are having an impact. Pupils take pride in the presentation of their work and are being more careful when editing their writing. They are developing the resilience and stamina to write at greater length and in more detail. You rightly recognise that there is more to do to develop these skills across other subjects.
- Staff are increasingly making careful and appropriate links between subjects and incorporating the development of literacy and numeracy skills where appropriate. Occasionally, some learning activities do not make these links clearly enough.

When this happens, opportunities to develop skills are missed and this slows progress, especially for the most able pupils. Leaders are aware of this and work to address this aspect of the wider curriculum is already underway.

- Rigorous procedures are in place to follow up pupils' absence. Pupils enjoy their learning and vulnerable families are well supported. As a result, attendance is good, including that of disadvantaged pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- lessons are consistently and suitably pitched for all ability groups
- the curriculum is further developed so that all pupils, particularly the most able, are challenged to improve their skills across all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynda Welham
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I held several meetings with you and your deputy headteacher. I met with members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I also met with the inclusion leader and the leaders of English and mathematics. With the office manager, I scrutinised the school's safeguarding procedures and the procedures for the recruitment and induction of staff. You accompanied me on my visits to classrooms. I talked to pupils about their learning. I looked at pupils' books with your English and mathematics leaders and heard a number of Year 6 pupils read. I considered a range of other evidence, including the school's latest assessment information, the school improvement plan, leaders' self-evaluation and child protection procedures and policies. As well as talking to pupils in lessons, I met with a group of pupils from different year groups to talk about their experience of school. I viewed the 42 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 31 free-text comments. I took into consideration nine questionnaires from staff and 63 questionnaires from pupils. At the beginning of the day, I had conversations with parents.